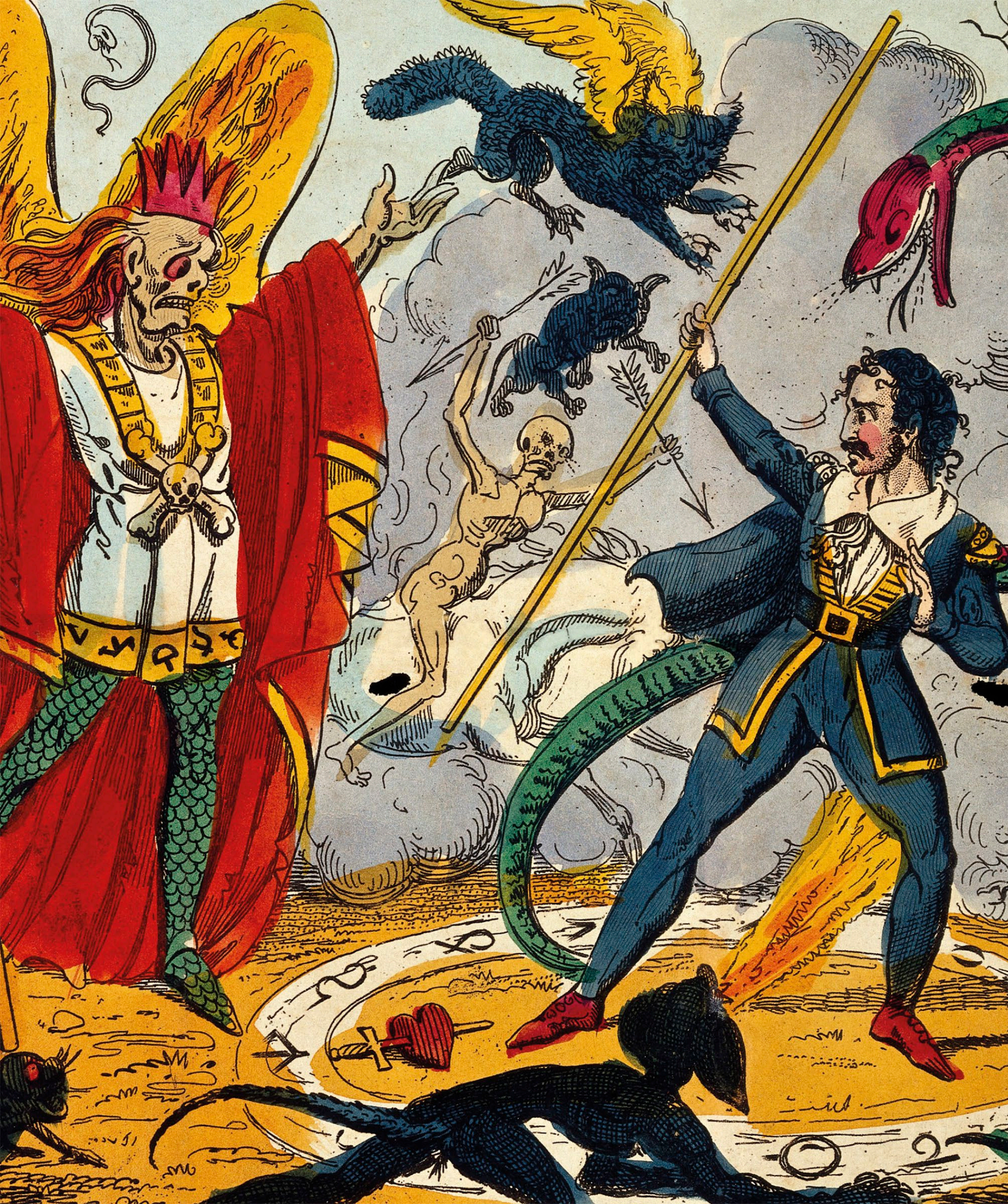

A HISTORY OF
MAGIC
WITCHCRAFT
& THE OCCULT





A HISTORY OF MAGIC WITCHCRAFT & THE OCCULT

Foreword by Suzannah Lipscomb

DK

Penguin Random House

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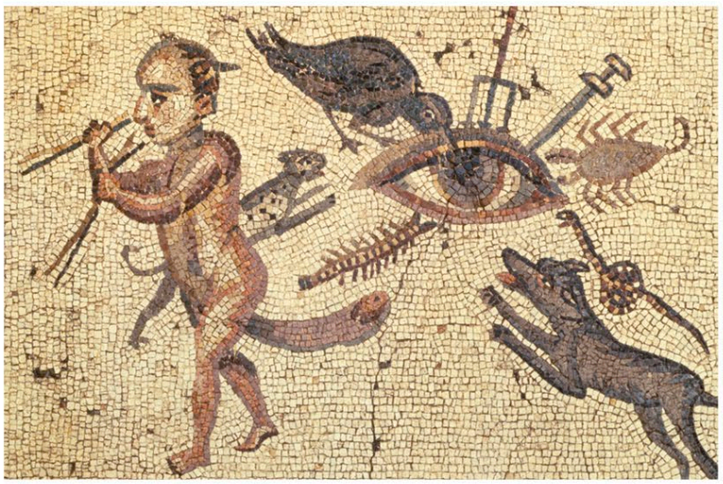
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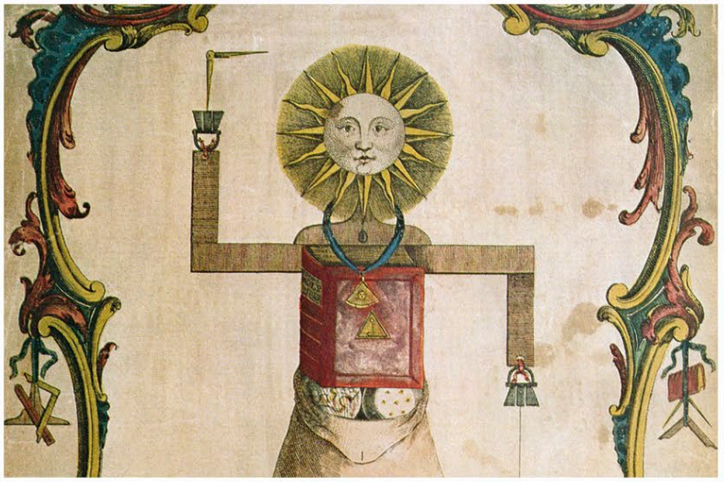
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FOREWORD

A little before Christmas 1611, a young girl led her blind, elderly grandmother to a mill-owner's house to request payment for work recently done. Not wanting to pay up, the mill-owner yelled at the women, "Get out of my ground, whores and witches, I will burn the one of you, and hang the other."

The elder woman wanted revenge, and she knew how to get it. "The speediest way," she later said, "to take a man's life by witchcraft is to make a picture of clay, like unto the shape of the person whom they mean to kill," prick it with a thorn or pin to cause pain, burn the clay figure, and "thereupon by that means, the body shall die."

This woman who believed herself and was believed by others to be a witch was Elizabeth Southerns, also known as Old Demdike. She was 80 years old and one of 20 people arrested in the English Pendle Witch Trials of 1612. She died awaiting trial, but 10 accused with her were hanged for having bewitched others to death "by devilish practice and hellish means," including Elizabeth's granddaughter, Alison.

Fear of witches and harmful magic, objects as intermediaries for the working of magic, and the use of magic by the powerless to gain agency are all recurring themes in this wonderful, global study of magical beliefs and practices. We move through time and space from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, through Roman *praecantrices* (female seers), Zoroastrian magic, medieval Japanese alchemy, and Scandinavian wand-carriers, through to Voudon (Voodoo), Ouija boards, Father Christmas, Wicca, and much else besides.

Such an all-encompassing survey teaches us that while the forms of magic—the spells, rituals, and powers—have varied, those turning to magic have fundamentally had similar concerns. They have wanted power over that which was naturally beyond their control: they have wanted to challenge the inexplicable and get a handle on the ambiguous and uncomfortable. The Inuit people of Greenland, we learn, for example, came to believe in spirit powers who controlled the bitter, frozen wastelands in which they lived. Magic promises to help with daily tasks that easily go wrong, control weather that destroys crops, and bring solace to the infertile or the sick. This means that there has always been a role for those who believe they can mediate with spirits, ward off evil, and stand on the threshold between the seen world of humans and the unseen realms of the spiritual. This is why magic has preoccupied people for centuries, and continues to do so.

I am especially struck by the vast number of ways in which humans have always tried to grapple with something over which we have zero control: that we live in linear time and do not know the future. It's not just tea leaves and palmistry: it's libanomancy (divination by looking at the patterns of a flame from a lamp), ornithomancy (observing the flight of birds), and even, my favorite, chremetismomancy (interpreting horses' neighs).

Often these forms of divination, like most magic, have been forbidden. Although the line between magic and miracle is a fine one, and where it falls largely depends on the beholder, magic has often been considered transgressive. And although magic has frequently been incorporated into dominant religions, it has, in turn, subverted orthodoxies and challenged established power structures.

Nowhere is this clearer than in beliefs about witchcraft. Those accusing others of witchcraft were themselves seeking supernatural explanations for misfortune. The great European witch craze of the 16th and 17th centuries, in which nearly 50,000 people were executed, rested also on the ideas that evil power came from the devil and—as women were thought to be weaker and more susceptible to diabolic temptation—that most witches were female, using their magical powers to manipulate men.

Magic is a topic around which misinformation swirls, like mists around a witch's cauldron. This spellbinding book will dispel the fog, lift the enchantment, and vividly illuminate this perennially fascinating subject.



SUZANNAH LIPSCOMB





ANCIENT ROOTS

PREHISTORY TO 400 CE

Introduction

Magic is as old as humankind. As soon as early people became aware of their environment, they believed it to be filled with spirits whose aid they invoked to control it, either directly through shamans—who they thought could travel into the spirit world—or through art. It is thought that early people modeled figurines and painted animals on cave walls in the belief that doing so would give them magical power over their world.

As societies became more advanced, they brought hierarchy and order to spiritual life. From around 4000 BCE, gods paralleled the rulers, priests, and nobility who held sway over Sumerian city-states or the ancient Egyptian kingdom. Far more is known about these more official religions than ever can be about their Neolithic antecedents because of the invention of writing. There is also more detail about magic, both good and bad. For example, an ancient Babylonian who broke the legs of a clay figurine to prevent a ghost wandering or a witch who tricked the god Marduk into inflicting disease on an enemy were intentionally harmful. Figurines buried beneath thresholds to prevent evil spirits entering, however, merely acknowledged and acted on the belief in evil forces in the spirit world that needed to be appeased.

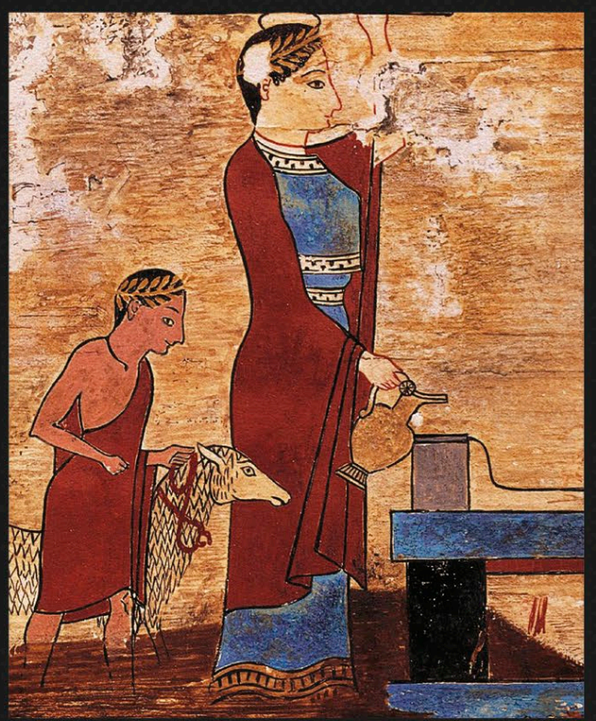
Much of the paraphernalia of later magic appears surprisingly early. Ancient Babylonians and Egyptians wore protective amulets and created books of spells. In Egypt, spells were even inscribed on the walls of tombs to give the soul magical protection on its hazardous journey into the afterlife.

Words, both spoken and written, have long been seen as magical, too, and ancient Greeks and Romans produced curse tablets on which the expression of a dark desire, accompanied by the prescribed formulas, was thought to bring about its fulfillment.

Magicians soon developed their own techniques and philosophies. Sympathetic magic—the idea that curative substances should resemble the ailment



Mesopotamian dog figure *see p.20*



Ancient Greek panel of animal sacrifice *see p.32*



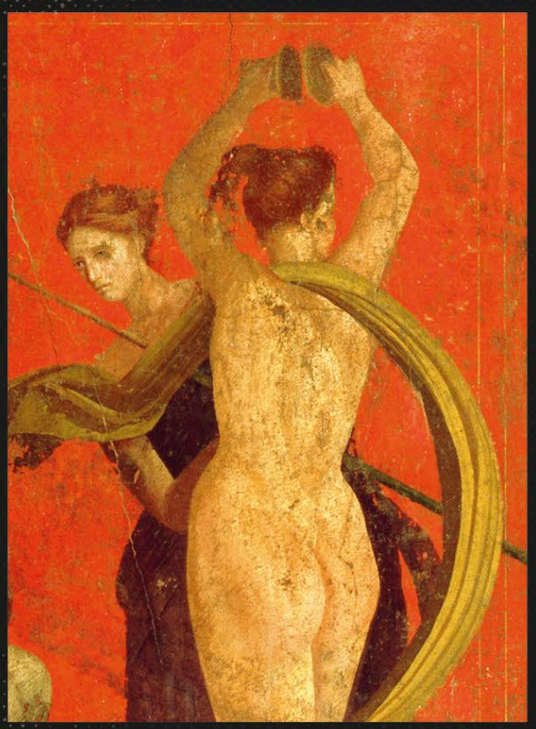
Roman mosaic of Odysseus *see p.39*

being magically treated (so, a yellow potion might cure jaundice)—was known to ancient Egyptians. The Greeks developed the concept of binding, that a magician could take physical or spiritual control of another person or object, even of a body as massive as the moon, through the proper rituals. As literary sources become more plentiful, there are even names for individual sorcerers, such as Circe, who in Homer's *Odyssey* enchanted Odysseus's companions and turned them into pigs, or Erichtho, the witch whom Roman poet Lucan recounts raised a corpse from the dead by pouring the spittle of a rabid dog upon it.

While many cultures produced specific, ordered rules for magic—few quite as many as Japan, which even had a ministry of magic—others retained a looser sense of the infinity of spiritual power. For the Maya, the observation of the cosmos and an awareness of vast cycles of time, the inhalation of psychotropic smoke to enter the spirit world, and the belief in spirit animals that accompanied powerful magicians echoed the earliest Neolithic magical beliefs. In the ancient world, chaos and death were never very far away and the desire to stave these off, if only for a short period, meant that magic was ever-present.

"Magic, by holding people's emotions in a triple bond … holds sway over a great part of humanity."

PLINY, *NATURALIS HISTORIA*, ON BELIEF IN MAGIC'S MEDICAL, RELIGIOUS, AND ASTROLOGICAL POWER, 1ST CENTURY CE



Pompeii fresco *see p.45*



Ancient Chinese energy map *see p.53*



Mayan codex *see p.59*

THE BIRTH OF RITUAL

prehistoric magic



▲ **Carnac stones**
Stretching out for more than a mile in Brittany, northwest France, are more than 3,000 stones, erected around 6,000 years ago, which are thought to have had some religious significance. Many of them are aligned in such straight rows that medieval local people believed they were a Roman army magically turned to stone.

As early as 95,000 years ago Neanderthals (a hominin species related to modern humans) carefully buried a small child in a cave in Iraq with a reverence that suggests belief in an afterlife. The leaving of pebbles that look anthropomorphic (with human characteristics) in caves, and the building, around 2500 BCE, of stone circles—such as Stonehenge and Carnac—that were aligned to the sun's rising or setting at certain times of year, point to an increasingly sophisticated and religious world view. With religion came magic.



▶ **The Jericho skull**
This skull from around 7500 BCE was found in Jericho in the Jordan valley. It was partially covered in plaster and the eye sockets filled with shells to recreate the deceased's features, possibly as part of an ancestor cult.

▶ **Animal rites**
The cave paintings at Lascaux in southwestern France date from around 15,000 BCE. Nearly 900 animals were depicted in all, most likely as part of a magic hunting ritual.

Prehistoric magic and early religion

Early people learned to control the environment by inventing tools and using fire. These skills gave them limited power but at the same time made them aware of just how vast the forces were that were out of humankind's control. To understand such mysteries as the sun's rising and setting, birth and death, and the daily struggle to hunt for food for survival, our earliest ancestors conceived of spirit forces that they could invoke to gain an advantage. A belief in supernatural forces and a human desire to use them to gain some sway over the physical world has been a feature of societies ever since.

Power and survival

Hunting was essential for the survival of early human communities. Societies that have relied on tracking and killing animals into modern times, such as the Inuit of Arctic Canada, view hunting as a sacred act as it takes the life of another being that they believe possesses a soul. Stone Age peoples may have thought similarly. From around 17,000 years ago they adorned barely accessible caves, such as Lascaux in France, with paintings of people hunting wild animals including stags, horses, bison, cattle, and bears. These paintings may have been connected with rituals to make hunting expeditions more successful or have been intended to appease the animals' spirits.

"Mourning the dead was one of the shared rituals that helped bind the society together."

BRITISH MUSEUM, ON THE JERICHO SKULL



"It is all from Wakan-Tanka [the buffalo] that the Holy Man has wisdom and the power to heal."

CHIEF FLAT-IRON OF THE OGLALA SIOUX IN NATALIE CURTIS' *THE INDIANS' BOOK*, 1907



▲ River deity protecting fishermen
This is one of a series of more than 50 monumental sandstone heads set up in front of the hearths of a Neolithic fishing village called Lepenski Vir beside the Danube in Serbia. The heads may represent guardian river deities.

Figures of fecundity

Fertility, too, preoccupied early peoples, as without new life their tribe would die. Many figurines of women with exaggerated hips and breasts have been found in caves. The physical characteristics of these figures are thought to suggest that people were calling on a mother goddess to bless them with children. Some of the statuettes were portable (perhaps to be held in the hand), such as the "Venus" figurines—ancient European sculptures believed to date from the Paleolithic era. One feature common to the Venus figures is the lack of facial detail, perhaps to give them universal appeal rather than resemblance to a specific individual.

Magic of the dead

Perhaps more potent than hunting, fertility, or the earth's mysteries was the fear of death. Formal burials have been found, dating from as early as 60,000 BCE, containing bones scattered with red ocher (suggestive of blood). Some burials also included flowers or necklaces to accompany the deceased into the next life. At Kebara Cave in Israel, Neanderthals buried several skeletons and skull bones, probably as a post-mortem rite.

Early peoples, too, seem to have had a fear of dead spirits. At Gough's Cave in Somerset, incisions on bones that are around 15,000 years old indicate that they engaged in ritual cannibalism. The aim of this may have been to acquire the powers of the dead or to prevent their spirits from inflicting damage on the living.

Animism and totems

Prehistoric religion is thought to have been animistic—imbuing the natural world, including the landscape and the animals that inhabited it, with magical or supernatural powers. Naturally distinctive geographical features, for example, a series of rock formations at Nyero in Uganda (possibly dating as far back as 12,000 years), became shrines. They were adorned with geometric paintings and visited by early peoples to make offerings to the spirits believed to be there. Animal-shaped carvings, often of human-animal hybrids, such as the 40,000-year-old "Lion Man" from a cave in southern Germany, were venerated, too. They were possibly a totem—a spirit animal with whom the tribe had a particular magical relationship.

Spirit world

Maintaining good relations with the many spirits who inhabited the world was vital for early peoples. Ritual specialists—often referred to as shamans—emerged to communicate with the spirits and try to influence them. Shamans could seemingly transport themselves to the realms of the spirits through trances brought on by chanting, the rhythmic banging of drums, or by smoking or ingesting hallucinogenic herbs or other psychotropic substances.



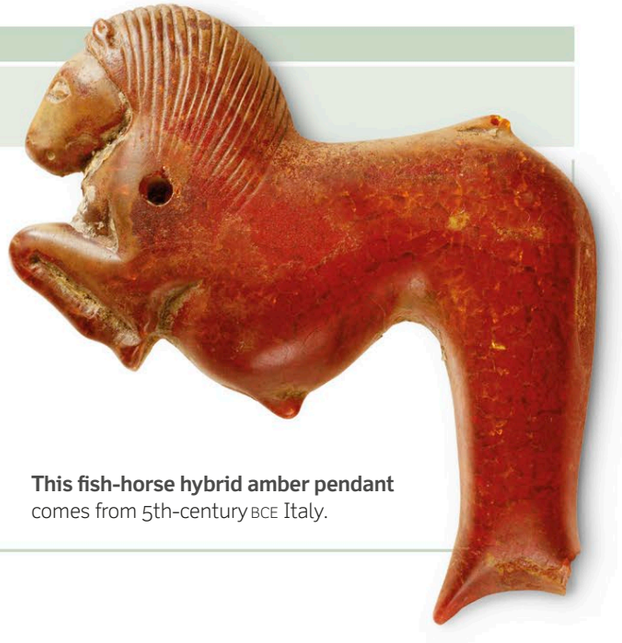
▲ Lascaux shaman
This cave painting shows a bison looming over a prostrate man next to a bird. One interpretation is that the figure depicted is a shaman and the bird is his spirit animal, traveling with him to the mystical realm while his body lies immobile in the physical one.

A headdress made of stag antlers found in the 11,000-year-old site of Star Carr in Yorkshire, may have been part of a shaman's ritual attire, while rock art discovered in Siberia shows an "X-ray" view of the interior skeleton of the subject. This view is thought to represent the suspended state between life and death that allowed the shaman to travel into the spirit world. Such beliefs persisted among indigenous peoples in Siberia into modern times. The earliest beliefs in magic may date back 100,000 years, but many have survived, in some form, until very recently.

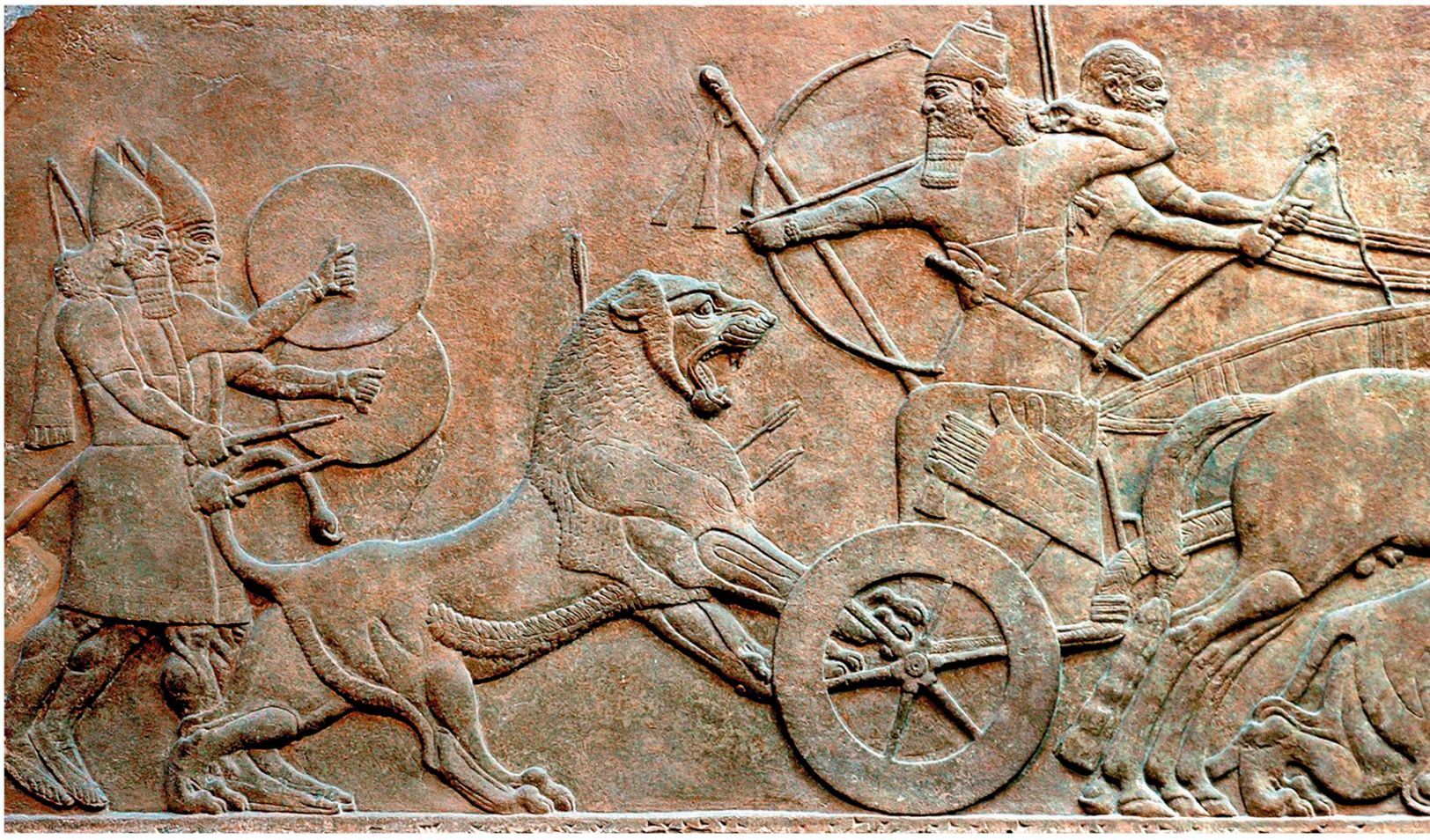
IN PRACTICE

Solidified sun

Amber, the fossilized resin of prehistoric pine trees, was treasured even in Neolithic times, and the ancient Greeks believed that it was the solidified rays of the sun. With its distinctive color and translucency, it became highly prized. It is electrostatic (it gives off sparks when rubbed), which also gave it a reputation for warding off danger, and it came to be regarded as a healing stone. Amber is found mainly along the shores of the Baltic Sea, but despite its comparative rarity necklaces and pendants made from it are a common archaeological find.



This fish-horse hybrid amber pendant comes from 5th-century BCE Italy.

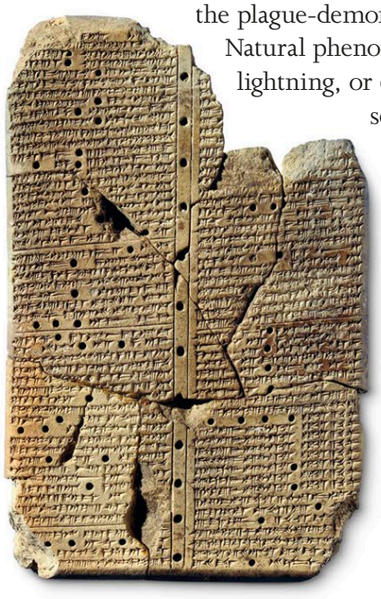


▲ Royal hunt
The 7th-century BCE Assyrian king Ashurbanipal is shown hunting lions in this frieze. It was an act with a wider symbolic meaning: the king was protecting his subjects as their *re'u* (shepherd) and also extending his dominion over the desert and the king of beasts.

MAGIC ALL AROUND

Mesopotamian magic

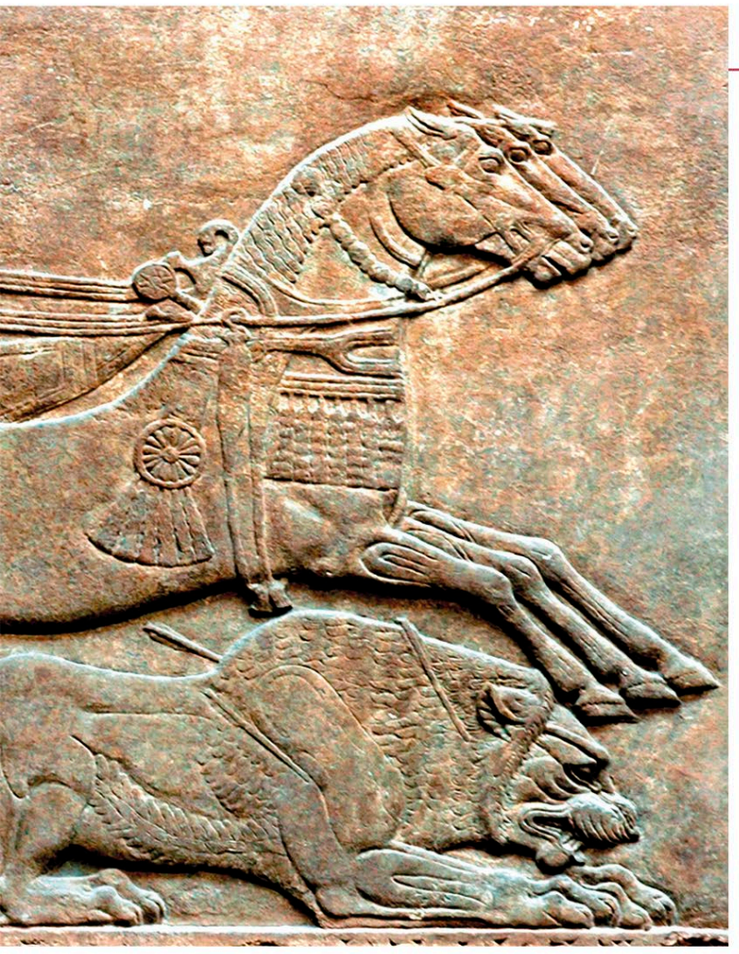
The peoples of ancient Mesopotamia—the land within the Tigris-Euphrates river system, now mainly Iraq—lived in a world of magical practice. Sumerians, Assyrians, and Babylonians all sought help from exorcists and omen-interpreters to gain protection from malign supernatural entities and discover the future. From the time of the Sumerians, who founded the first cities around 4000 BCE, to that of the Babylonians over 3,000 years later, Mesopotamia was a land in which magic was part of everyday life.



▶ Maqlu (burning) tablet
Dating from around 700 BCE, this is the seventh of nine tablets. It contains chants for an *ashipu* (exorcist) to use to drive out witches who may have cursed a victim.

Beneath the official pantheon, including the likes of Enlil, the Assyrian sky god, and Ea, the god of wisdom, was a layer of demons, such as Lamashtu, who threatened pregnant women, and Namtaru, the plague-demon, who needed to be mollified.

Natural phenomena such as floods and lightning, or epidemic diseases, were not scientifically understood despite Mesopotamian advances, and so people at all levels of society preferred supernatural explanations. Disasters were believed to be caused by *mamitu* (curses) laid by witches, by victims committing offenses (sometimes unknowingly) against the gods, or through unintentionally ignoring divine signs. Kings guarded against these occurrences by consulting



> "I have called on twilight, midnight, and dawn, because a sorceress has bewitched me."
>
> MAQLU TABLET 1, c.1600 BCE

temple priests, in particular *ashipu* (exorcists), who performed magical rituals, and *baru*, who interpreted omens. Palace archives were stocked with collections of clay cuneiform tablets containing spells, incantations, and omens. Huge numbers have been recovered from the palace library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal. Ordinary people also called on the services of *ashipu* to cast protective spells, and used amulets and enchanted figurines to dispel evil spirits.

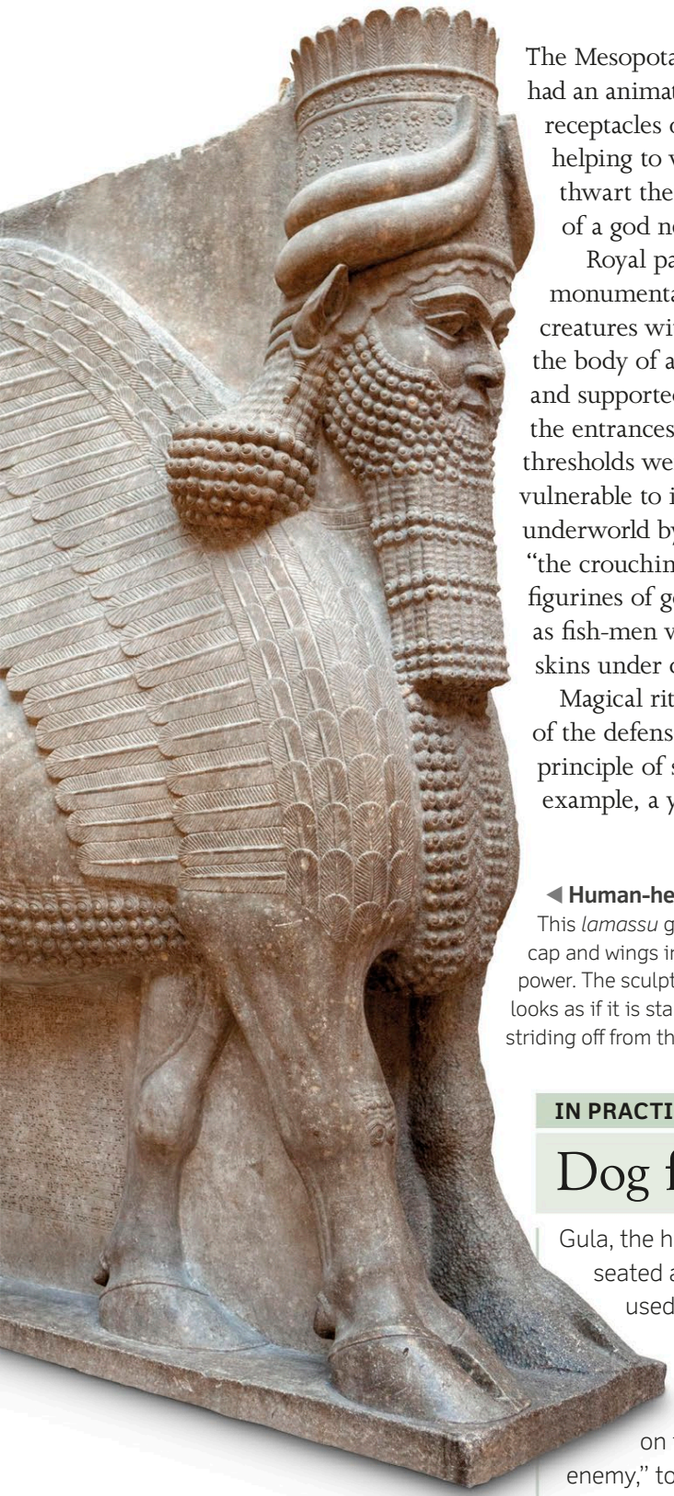
Anti-witchcraft and omens

Personal misfortune or sickness was often blamed on witches or demons. Witches were also thought to secretly put curses on people. Priests developed rituals to counteract malign influences and collected them in nine Maqlu tablets, first compiled around 1600 BCE. They were passed down through generations of *ashipu* for about the next thousand years. A collection of 100 incantations, across eight of the tablets, enabled the *ashipu* to identify and tame evil magic; the last tablet gives instructions for a ritual to banish a curse, which involved burning a figurine of the witch responsible. Exorcists often doubled as doctors, and another tablet contains a spell calling on Gula, the goddess of health, to drive out the ghost making a patient ill.

Baru engaged in extispicy (divination by examining the entrails of sheep). They also observed celestial signs, such as eclipses, haloes around the sun (which portended the destruction of a city), irregularities in the movements of Venus, and cloud conditions. More unusual portents included the birth of deformed animals or conjoined twins, and even a red dog urinating on a man—a predictor of happiness.



▼ Incantation bowl
A very late example of the Mesopotamian magical tradition, this bowl, from the 5–7th centuries CE, contains an incantation in Aramaic and depicts a demon in the center. Such bowls were often buried at the corners of rooms for protection.



The Mesopotamians believed that objects had an animate quality and could act as the receptacles of enormous magical power, helping to ward off evil spirits and thwart their actions, or gain the favor of a god needed to drive them away.

Royal palaces were guarded by monumental statues of *lamassu*, winged creatures with the head of a man and the body of a bull or lion, which blocked and supported gateways, corridors, and the entrances to throne rooms. These thresholds were seen as particularly vulnerable to infiltration from the underworld by demons such as Rabisu, "the crouching one." Poorer people placed figurines of gods or hybrid creatures such as fish-men with pointed hats and scaly skins under doorways or windows.

Magical rituals were an important part of the defense against dark magic. The principle of substitution was used, so, for example, a young goat would be dressed in the clothes and sandals of a sick man and sacrificed to the goddess of death, in order that she would take the goat not the ill person. Similarly, ghost effigies were made to prevent the deceased from wandering or speaking—typically, a clay figure would be inscribed with the dead person's name, its feet broken, and a dog's tooth put in its mouth to gag it.

Much evil magic was believed to have been carried out through witches tricking deities into helping them. Prayers to the gods, therefore, especially to Marduk, who was closely associated with magic, asked him to mediate with his powerful father Ea, who was the ultimate source of the ritual magic that *ashipu* used in their exorcisms.

◀ Human-headed lion
This *lamassu* guarded a palace door. The horned cap and wings indicate its divinity, and the belt its power. The sculptor gave the figure five legs so it looks as if it is standing firmly from the front but striding off from the side.

Amulets to ward off evil

Wearing amulets was another part of protective magic, and such amulets often portrayed the spirit they were supposed to ward off. For instance, Pazuzu, the king of the wind demons, would be depicted as a creature with a bird's chest and talons, holding a thunderbolt, and Lamashtu, who preyed on pregnant women, as a hybrid of a donkey, lion, and bird. Amulets could protect a traveler in hostile territory inhabited by demons, such as the desert, or keep disease away from a house during an epidemic. In the Mesopotamian world much was unpredictable, and magic tilted the balance just a little in people's favor.

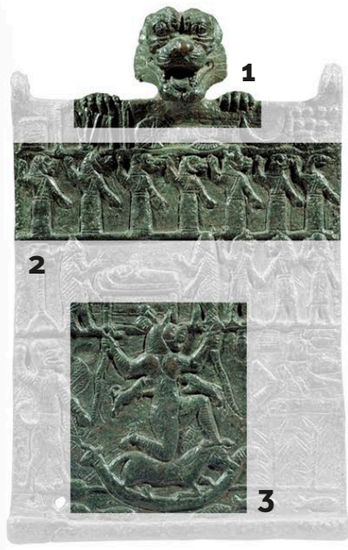
IN PRACTICE

Dog figurines

Gula, the healing goddess, was frequently depicted with a dog seated at her feet, and so clay or bronze dog figurines were used to invoke her aid. Buried at thresholds or other places vulnerable to the infiltration of magic, they acted as mystical guard dogs, keeping out disease or other misfortunes. They often had names carved on them, such as "Loud of bark" or "Catcher of the enemy," to give them added potency. Gula was an underworld goddess, too, and the dog figurines may also have been intended to help guide the deceased into the next world.



This terra-cotta fragment of Gula's dog is part of a larger sculpture or temple decoration.



KEY

1 Lion-headed Pazuzu grips the plaque with his claws.

2 Protective deities, with lion heads, form a two-row procession.

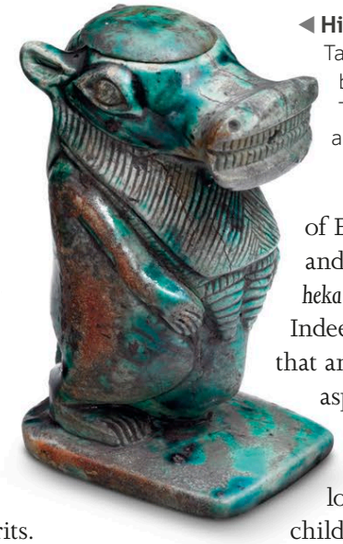
3 Pazuzu drives off Lamashtu.

◀ Protective plaque
This plaque depicts Pazuzu, king of the wind demons and lord of the southwest winds from the desert, which brought famine and locusts. It was crafted to provide protection from Pazuzu himself and to co-opt his aid in driving away another demon, Lamashtu.

A UNIVERSAL FORCE

Egyptian magic

Heka (magic) was already at the heart of Egyptian beliefs by 4000 BCE. Creator deities such as Nu (the watery abyss) were said to have used *heka* to bring the world into existence from primordial chaos. In doing so, they subdued the forces of chaos, but the forces constantly sought to return and could only be stopped by *heka*. For the ancient Egyptians, it was not just the gods that handled magic. Lesser supernatural beings, pharaohs, and the dead were thought to possess an element of *heka*, which they could channel through the use of spells to deflect the attention of malevolent spirits.



◀ **Hippopotamus goddess**
Taweret, depicted on this steatite jar, was believed to aid women during childbirth. The jar may have held a small papyrus with a magic spell to protect mother and child.

Preserving cosmic harmony

The ancient Egyptians also believed in another form of magic power called *akhu*, which was malign and closely associated with beings of the underworld. To protect against *akhu* magical practitioners such as priests, scribes in the "Houses of Life"—which held the manuscript collections of Egyptian temples—*sunu* (doctors), and *sau* (amulet-makers) employed *heka* spells, rituals, and magical objects. Indeed, faith in *heka* was so widespread that ancient Egyptians used it in all aspects of life from matters of state to the delivery of oracles and more mundane village affairs, such as love matches, protection during childbirth, and curing minor illnesses. As well as being an abstract force, there was a god called Heka who personified magic. Heka helped ensure the harmony of the cosmos and acted as a conduit through whom worshippers could seek divine favors. He had a female counterpart, Weret-hekau (Great of Magic), who was depicted in the form of a cobra. It is thought that the snake-headed staffs often used by ancient Egyptian magicians may have represented her.

▼ **Wand of power**
Curved wands of hippopotamus ivory carved with protective symbols were believed to protect children and pregnant women. This one has an inscription on the front reading "protection of day" and "protection of night."



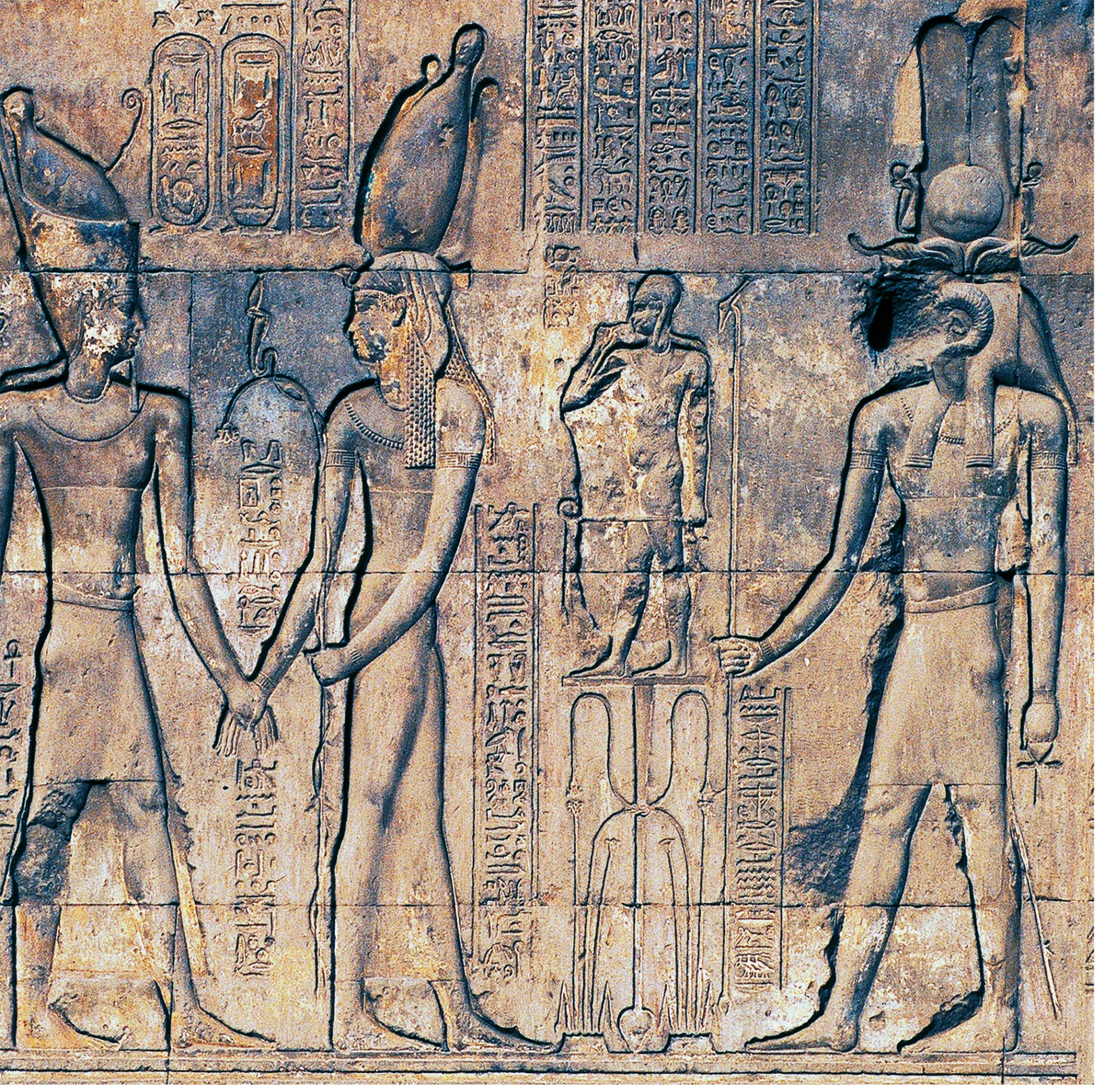
Supernatural powers

Magic and religion enjoyed a close relationship in ancient Egypt. The same priests who performed ceremonies in the temples—channeling divine power via the pharaoh to ensure that the sun rose each morning and the Nile floods brought fertility to the land—chanted spells and blessed



"You put the shell of a crocodile's egg inside the flame. It will be enchanted instantly."

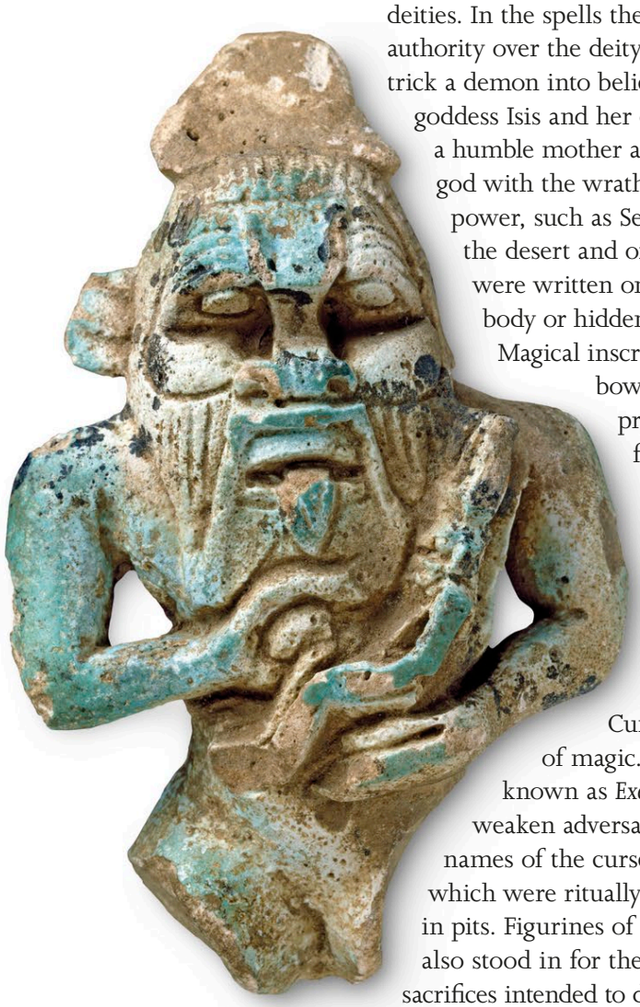
SPELL FROM THE *LONDON-LEIDEN DEMOTIC PAPYRUS*, 3RD CENTURY CE



amulets for far more private purposes. They were the custodians of spell books such as *The Book of Overthrowing Apep*. Apep was the serpent who personified the forces of chaos, and whose evil powers were seen as a particular threat.

Although all gods were believed to possess *heka*, that of the lion goddess Sekhmet was especially powerful. Her "Seven Arrows" brought infectious diseases, and the "slaughterers of Sekhmet," a group of demonic messengers, could wreak havoc during the five extra days added at the end of the calendar year to harmonize it with the solar year. To guard against them, magicians recited a spell called *The Book of the Last Days of the Year* and wrapped linen around their necks, exchanging amulets in the shape of Sekhmet to ward off Sekhmet's anger.

▲ **God of magic**
Heka, the personification of *heka* (magic), is shown with Pharaoh Thutmose III, who ruled in the 15th century BCE, and the ram-headed Nile god Khnum in this relief from the great hall of Khnum's temple at Esna.



▲ **Invoking protection**
The lion-dwarf god Bes was a popular protector god. His hideous face was believed to scare off demons. He was most often called on during childbirth, and in this amulet he cradles the infant Horus.

Ancient Egyptian priests and other magicians had a variety of strategies for thwarting malevolent deities. In the spells themselves they might claim authority over the deity by uttering its name; or trick a demon into believing it was attacking the goddess Isis and her child Horus rather than a humble mother and baby; or threaten the god with the wrath of an even more terrible power, such as Seth, the murderous deity of the desert and of disorder. Protective spells were written on papyri and worn on the body or hidden in containers as amulets. Magical inscriptions might be written on bowls and the person seeking protection would drink water from these. Cippi (carved slabs) showing Horus defeating dangerous animals such as snakes were placed in rooms to prevent and cure stings and bites.

Cursing enemies

Curses were a specialized form of magic. Contained in collections known as *Execration Texts*, they sought to weaken adversaries through magic. The names of the cursed were written on pots, which were ritually smashed and deposited in pits. Figurines of bound men and women also stood in for the real targets in ritual sacrifices intended to deny the victims an afterlife. However, people left in limbo between this life and the next could become *mut* (the troublesome dead who would seek revenge on the living).

One curse calls for the practitioner to cut hair from a corpse and tie it to that of a living person, who would then be driven mad. Another orders a curse papyrus to be attached to an iron ring and buried in a grave. The papyrus would bind the deceased forever to the tomb. Curses written within tombs themselves warned trespassers against desecrating the burial chamber on pain of eternal suffering. This practice was more common during the Old Kingdom (2575–2150 BCE) as burials, including those within pyramids, became more elaborate and the grave goods they contained more attractive to robbers.



▲ **Paper magic**
This section of the *London Medical Papyrus*, composed around 1300 BCE, includes around 60 medical and magical remedies for a range of diseases, particularly of the eye, and for burns and gynecological conditions.

Medicine and magic

The line between medicine and magic was blurred in ancient Egypt, and priests of Sekhmet often also acted as doctors. In the absence of effective remedies to cure many ailments, they turned to spells and rituals. Some magic was "sympathetic,"

"As for any person, scribe, any wise man, any commoner, or any inferior, who will do evil in this tomb ... they will submit to the wrath of Thoth."

CURSE FROM TOMB OF DJEFAYHAPY, C. 1900 BCE



using curative substances that were similar to the perceived cause of the ailment, such as dung to alleviate gut problems.

Magicians used spells either as a direct measure, such as "ordering" a stuck bone to leave the patient's throat, or indirectly, for instance, telling the spirit (often identified as a foreign demon) responsible for the illness to leave the sick person. Amulets were also placed on afflicted parts of the body or used to stave off illness.



▶ **Wooden mummy shabti**
At first figurines like this acted as a substitute for the deceased, but by the 16th century BCE they were seen as workers and companions to provide for the dead person in the afterlife.

Death was the greatest challenge. Observances on behalf of the dead were elaborate, at least for the elite, and aimed to unite the *ka* and *ba*, the two parts of the soul, in death. Incantations and mummification were carried out to protect the *ka*, the life source, and to release the *ba*, which contained a person's character, on its journey to the underworld.

For kings, *Pyramid Texts*, written down from the 27th century BCE, let their souls fight demons, pay off otherworldly boatmen, and reach the next life. It was another 600 years before texts appeared offering magical protection to a wider section of society.



THOTH

Holder of magic secrets

Thoth, the god of wisdom and writing, was strongly associated with magic. Depicted with the head of a baboon or an ibis (as here), he was said to have invented the hieroglyphic script, which he used to write 42 secret books of wisdom that were kept in temples. He was also believed to have restored the left eye of Horus (the moon) after it was damaged by Seth and images of this, called the *wedjat* (sound eye), were considered to possess great magical power. Thoth also journeyed into the deep desert to retrieve the eye of Ra, which the king of the gods needed to see, and acted as the scribe of the underworld, recording the result of weighing a deceased person's sins. Hermes Trismegistus, the Thrice Great magician of later Greek and Roman myth, is said to have derived from Thoth.

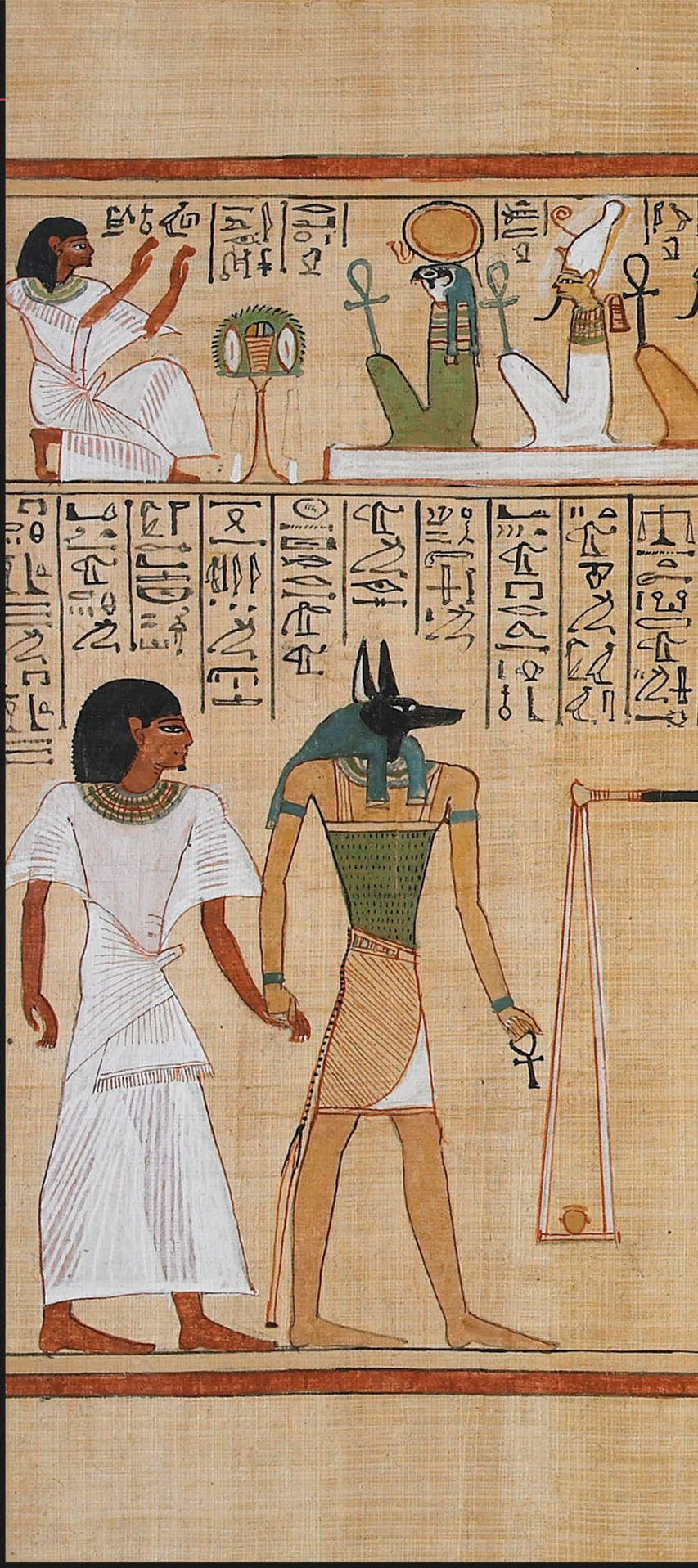
Spells for the afterlife

In ancient Egyptian belief, the *ba* (the element of the soul that contained the personality of the deceased) faced a series of trials on its journey to the underworld. Failing these trials would mean a second death—obliterating earthly memory of the deceased, who would wander as a ghost forever. To avoid this second death, the Egyptians covered the walls of their tombs with The Book of the Dead, texts containing spells for the soul's protection. The scene here shows the *ba* (in white) accompanied by jackal-headed Anubis, who watches the soul's sins being weighed against a feather. If the sins are heavier, the *ba* will be devoured by Ammit, a crocodile-headed demon.

The Book of the Dead was never codified and no two copies are the same. Each was composed at a patron's request, incorporating prayers that best reflected the individual in order to help them in the afterlife. Composition of Books of the Dead began around 1700 BCE, replacing earlier texts. Spells were added until a body of around 200 became common by about 1500 BCE. Contained in scrolls up to 22 yd (20 m) in length for commoners, or for royalty painted on tomb walls, the spells were said to be spoken by the *ba* at key points along its journey. Spell 4 is to let the *ba* turn into a snake, Spell 89 to return to the tomb at night, and Spell 98 to grant it passage on a ferry to the underworld. So powerful was ancient Egyptian belief in their efficacy that the scrolls were popular until the Roman conquest in 30 BCE.

"I am noble, I am a spirit … Oh all you gods and all you spirits, prepare a path for me."

SPELL 9, BOOK OF THE DEAD





▲ **Anubis weighs the sins** of Apis under the watchful eye of Thoth in this painting from a Book of the Dead produced for Hunefer, a royal scribe.

MIRACLES AND FORBIDDEN MAGIC

ancient Hebrew magic



▲ **Heaven-sent insight**
In this manuscript illumination the prophet Ezekiel is flanked by an angel and, at the top right, the hand of God, the two sources of inspiration for his far-seeing powers.

There are many references to the supernatural in the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible). Although priests of the Jewish religion sanction most of these allusions, nods to earlier beliefs and ritual practices are also included, which are regarded as forbidden magic in Judaism.

Power and prophets

The conventional attitude to magic in the Tanakh is driven by the fact that the Jewish people believe exclusively in one God. In early Judaism, religious practices that were associated with other belief systems risked being labeled as demonic. Yet magical elements of ancient Canaanite beliefs still fused with the religion in its infancy. For example, the Tanakh narrates how the prophets, who played a key role in revealing God's word, fell into ecstatic trances in order to receive their visions. One of them, Elijah, engaged in a competition with the overtly pagan priests of Baal on a mountaintop to see who could produce fire to burn a sacrificial offering. The text also recounts how Elijah's prayers were answered and rain fell to end a prolonged drought that had blighted the land of Israel. The biblical patriarchs themselves performed miracles, acting as instruments of God's power: during the captivity of Israelites in Egypt, Moses' brother Aaron engaged in a duel with the pharaoh's magicians, who transformed their staffs into serpents, only to have Aaron change his own rod into a larger snake that devoured them all.

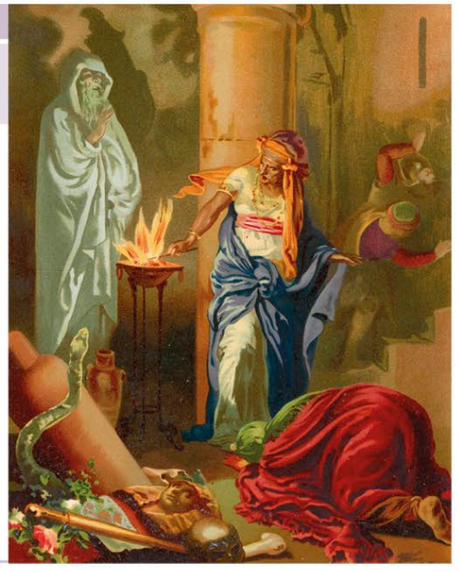
Telling the future

In Deuteronomy 18:10–11, Moses says: "There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer." Despite these prohibitions (and there are several other passages in the Tanakh forbidding the practice of magic), prophecy was an authorized way of revealing the future. References to telling the

IN CONTEXT

The Witch of Endor

According to the Tanakh, even the Israelites' leaders sometimes resorted to dark magic, albeit with dire consequences. When King Saul was faced with an invasion by the Philistines, he consulted the temple oracle, but to no avail. In desperation, he traveled to Endor and consulted a witch, who raised the spirit of the prophet Samuel. The ghost chided Saul for disturbing him and prophesied his doom for disobeying God's commandments against such magic. A terrified Saul was defeated and died in battle the next day, his demise a terrible warning to those who flirted with necromancy.



In this 19th-century reimagining, the witch summons Samuel's spirit.



▲ **Miraculous ascent**
This Italian fresco shows the prophet Elijah being taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire, propelled skyward by a whirlwind. As he departed the earth, Elijah dropped his cloak onto Elisha—a sign that he had chosen him to be his prophet successor.

future are plentiful in the Tanakh, including the consultation of seers to interpret dreams such as Joseph's about lean cattle, which predicted famine in Egypt; belomancy, the shaking of arrows in a sacred quiver; and official divination, probably by casting lots. All of these divinatory activities were said to channel God's will, rather than invoke magic to enforce action upon him.

Closer to ancient Middle Eastern practices were descriptions of the *sotah* ritual—a woman suspected of infidelity drank water in which parchment bearing specific verses from the Tanakh had been dissolved. If she was guilty, her body was said to undergo an immediate, visible change that would eventually lead to her death. Ultimately, however, the Tanakh only supports human intervention sanctioned by God, as when the Israelites reached the Jordan River on their way into the Promised Land. With God's blessing, the Ark of the Covenant that the priests carried caused the water to miraculously part and let them pass unscathed.



▼ The divine lord
This golden earring depicts Ahura Mazda, the supreme god of the Zoroastrian pantheon, surrounded by animals.

POWER OF THE MAGI

ancient Persian magic

In Persia, from around the 6th century BCE, Zoroastrianism developed under the Achaemenid empire. Its prophet Zoroaster (also known as Zarathustra) urged his followers to worship the supreme god Ahura Mazda. The world Ahura Mazda created became the arena of a struggle between Spenta Mainyu, the spirit of good, and his evil counterpart Angra Mainyu, marked by dark magic. Humans were free to choose their side.

The Magi were hereditary priests and specialists in Zoroastrian ritual who performed public and private ceremonies. Duties of the Magi included the *lan* sacrifice, which ensured the ruler's well-being, and tending to the sacred flame—the symbol of Spenta Mainyu—which burned in fire temples throughout the empire. There were terrible consequences for neglecting these duties. Greek historian Herodotus also refers to the Magi intoning over the flesh of sacrificial animals and interpreting dreams.

▼ Tending the fire altar
This Magus recites a ritual while standing before a fire altar. Making sure that the flame did not go out was his most sacred duty. If he did let it go out, he risked accusations of being a *daevayasna* (devil worshipper).



▶ Ready for ritual
Embossed on a sheet of gold, a Magus bears in one hand a cup of *haoma*, a mild intoxicant used in Zoroastrian rites, and in the other holds a *barsom*, the ritual bundle of twigs that represented the bounty of the vegetable kingdom.



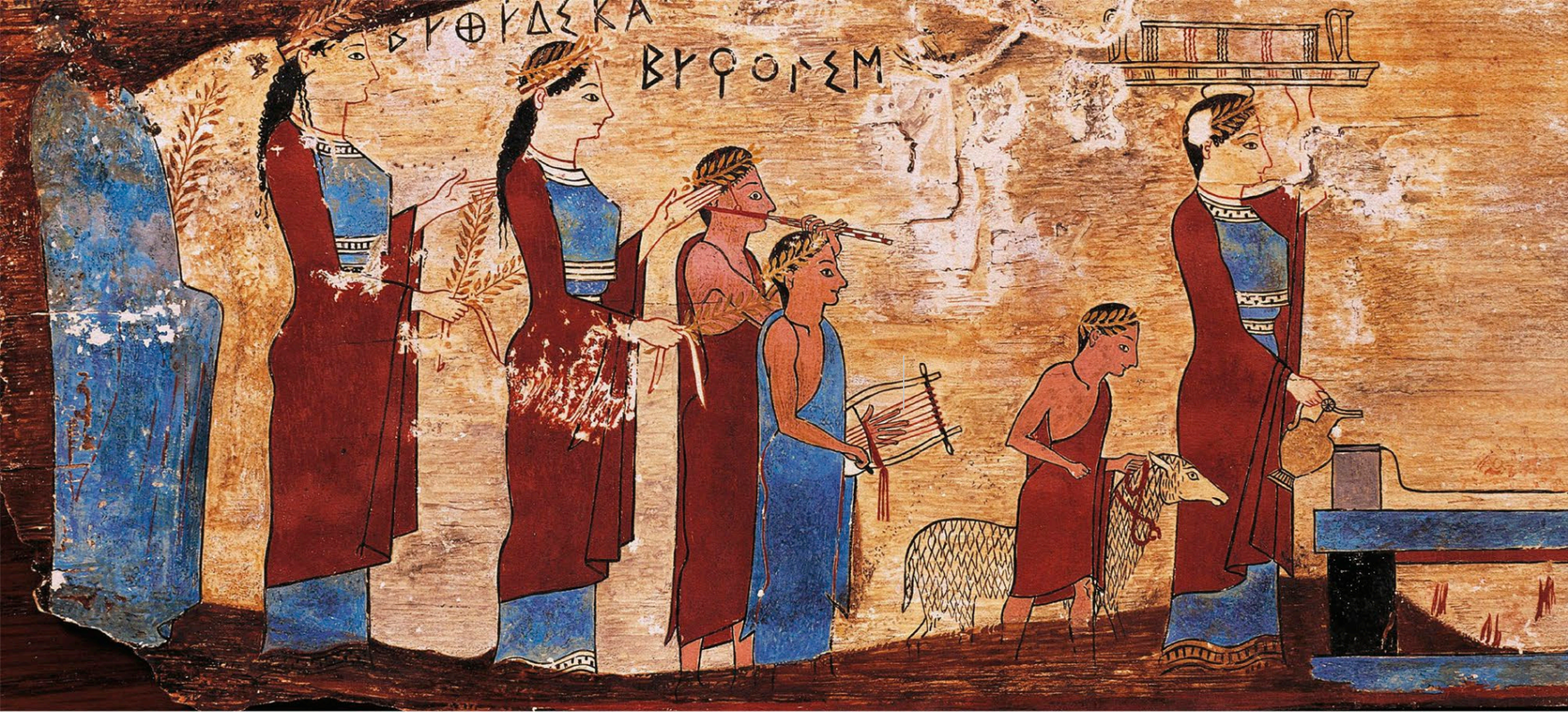
Daevas and sorcerers

More information on the Magi comes from the *Avestas*, the sacred Zoroastrian texts. According to the *Avestas*, there were other divine beings called *daevas*, who should not be worshipped, but who nonetheless had devotees among the Magi known as *daevayasna*. *Daevayasna* included *yatu* (sorcerers) and *pairika* (witches). *Pairika* were at first believed to be supernatural spirits who sought to harm humans.

To protect against *pairika* the Magi could invoke the name of Ahura Mazda, or say prayers over clipped nails that were then buried. Ahura Mazda himself was believed to have told Zoroaster how rubbing the feather of the Varenjana bird against a Magus's body could ward off evil. In general, however, the Magi relied on ritual purity—keeping altars clear of pollutants such as excrement and dead matter—and a belief that stoking the sacred temple flame could kill a million *daevas*.

Accusations of *jadugih* (sorcery) were extremely serious for Persians. The accused could have molten metal poured over their tongue to determine guilt, while in the afterlife sorcerers were said to be consigned to infernal punishments such as having their bellies gnawed by dogs or standing for eternity on red-hot copper.

> "It is not lawful to offer sacrifice unless there is a Magus present."
>
> **HERODOTUS**, *HISTORIES 1.131*, c. 430 BCE



▲ **Sacrificial sheep**
Animal sacrifice was a common way of appeasing the gods. This 6th-century BCE votive panel from Pitsa in Greece depicts celebrants offering a sheep to the nymphs to whom the area was sacred.

ENLISTING THE GODS

ancient Greek magic

From Homer's *Iliad* in the Bronze Age to the wider Hellenistic world of the early centuries CE, spell books, amulets, literary accounts, and inscriptions bear witness to the pervasiveness of *mageia* (magic). As with many old belief systems, formal religion and magic were interlinked. Divine influence suffused the whole world, and those empowered to communicate with the gods included priests, philosophers, physicians, and poets.

Formal religion in ancient Greece was a public affair of sacrifice and prayer, festivals and temples. Magic was a more hidden and transgressive form of appeal to the gods, often used for personal gain or to harm others. Although temple priests could perform ritual magic, personal requests were more often carried out by itinerant magicians and soothsayers, and others on the margins of society, such as prostitutes, who sometimes cast love spells.

Greek philosophers claimed to reject magic, and the authors of the Hippocratic medical text *On Sacred Disease* scorned the notion that spells could cause an eclipse or cure a fever. However, those very same physicians prescribed sleeping in the sacred precinct of the god Asclepius to heal ailments. Greeks at all levels continued to turn

▼ **Greek Magical Papyri**
This collection of texts was written in Egypt between the 1st century BCE and 4th century CE, and contains spells for love, divination, and healing.



Revelation spell to encourage visions

"Take the dung of a dog-faced baboon, two eggs of an ibex, four drams of frankincense, a single onion. Put all these onto a mortar with the mouse."

GREEK MAGICAL PAPYRUS

to various remedies to secure the favor of Eros, the god of love, or, more darkly, of Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft. First on their list was magic, in all its guises.

Tools of magic

Certain stones were believed to possess magical powers, such as hematite (bloodstone), thought to protect unborn babies, and light-green jasper, used to cure stomach infections. These were set into amulets of wood, bone, or stone that the supplicant could wear. Sailors about to embark on a hazardous voyage might have made use of a protective pendant depicting Poseidon (god of the sea), trident in hand and foot on a dolphin, or those in fear of the *baskania* (the evil eye) might have employed an eye-shaped pendant to ward off its gaze.

Books of spells laid down the rituals to be carried out in the creation of amulets, involving incantations and hand gestures. Many amulets were inscribed with anagrams or palindromes of gods' names, or were lodged in lockets with papyrus texts containing mythical narratives.

Various implements completed the magician's ritual toolkit, from wands, such as that of mythical enchantress Circe, to polished stones, mirrors, water basins, cymbals, harps, and the *rhombos*, a spinner used to amplify magical power. Magicians also employed *pharmaka* (potions)—in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus takes one made from moly (a magical herb) to stop Circe from turning him into a pig. *Pharmaka* were supplemented by *philtra* (love potions and poisons). The latter appeared in the myths of Hercules: Deianeira, the hero's wife, accidentally killed her husband when she smeared his cloak with a *philtra*—the blood of the centaur Nessus.



▶ **Medea the sorceress**
This vase depicts Medea demonstrating her skill by dismembering and boiling an old ram. The magical herbs in the cauldron bring it back to life and restore its youth.

Originally an oral tradition, magic entered the written Greek record in the 6th century BCE. This was when ideas of magic were filtering westward from the Persian empire (and magicians were sometimes called "Chaldeans," from a Persian province bordering Babylonia). A large number of spells survive from the 4th century BCE, and there was another upsurge in the 1st century BCE, typified by the Greek Magical Papyri found in Egypt. These cover many topics, including spells for healing, evading evil, and harming enemies.

Binding magic

Behind much of the theory of Greek magic lay the concept of binding—taking control of the physical or intellectual attributes of the victim and binding them to the will of the spell caster. Even celestial objects such as the moon could be bound, in a ritual known as "drawing down the moon," a speciality of Thracian witches who collected "moon-foam" to act as an amplifier in magical potions.

Public and private curses

Curses were a specialized form of binding magic. They were sometimes public, such as those on tombs that warned passers-by against violating the grave, or civic, such as that associated with the vow made by the people of Thera to colonize Cyrene in North Africa. As the Therans made the vow, they melted wax figurines so that if they failed to fulfill their oath, a curse would strike and they, too, would melt.

More private curses were made secretly on papyri and deposited underground. They often began with the formula "I bind," listing all the parts of the victim's body, although for some targets, such as athletes, they might simply bind the limbs of an effigy to ruin the person's ability to compete.

To bind the will of the gods was a far more difficult task, involving a branch of magic known as theurgy. Practitioners of theurgy might project themselves into the divine realm through dreams, or achieve visions through lecanomancy (the dropping of oil on water in a basin—the resulting ripples inspiring divine communication), or libanomancy (making contact with the gods by looking at the patterns of a flame from a lamp).



IN PRACTICE

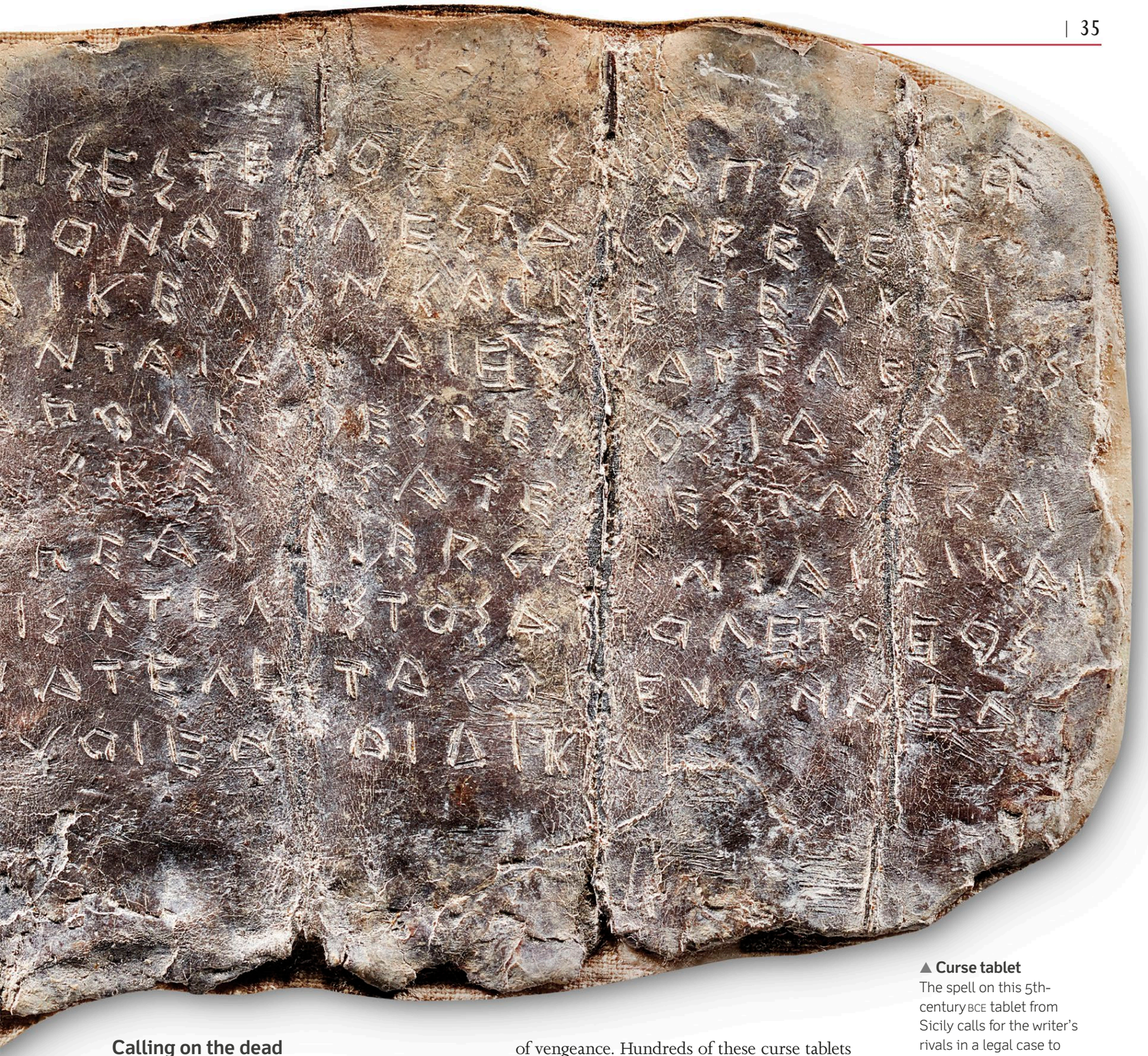
Magical figurines

Magic rituals sometimes involved the use of clay or metal figurines, representing the person to be bound or cursed. The limbs were often symbolically tied or broken, or the body pierced with nails (ideally taken from a shipwreck). The figurine was then placed in a miniature lead coffin (see below), inscribed with the victim's name and the curse, and buried in a place of magical power such as at a crossroads.



"And take 13 copper needles and stick one in the brain while saying 'I am piercing your brain' …"

GREAT PARIS MAGICAL PAPYRUS, 3RD CENTURY CE



▲ **Curse tablet**
The spell on this 5th-century BCE tablet from Sicily calls for the writer's rivals in a legal case to be rendered incapable of pleading their side of the argument in court.

Calling on the dead

Curses represented the darker side of Greek magic, surpassed only by necromancy, the art of speaking with, or even raising, the dead, which took place at sites such as the Necromanteion in Epirus. Some curses were written on *lamellae* (thin lead sheets), which were then rolled up and deposited in wells or buried with corpses, who would convey the invoker's desires to underworld powers such as the Furies and the Praxidikai—demonic spirits of vengeance. Hundreds of these curse tablets have been found across the Greek world, and the practice later spread into the Roman Empire, as far as Britain. Grievances included calls for justice against thieves, unfaithful spouses, or business competitors. While the Greeks might thank the gods, offering clay models of heads, legs, or wombs for the success of magic healing rituals, they were not above calling on those same powers to inflict deadly damage on their enemies.



▲ Delphic oracle
In this fresco from a vase fragment, the god Apollo speaks to the priestess, the Pythia, at Delphi. In an oracular ceremony, the Pythia sat on a cooking tripod and delivered her message in hexameter verse, said to be inspired by the god himself.

"Let us ask some seer or priest, or some reader of dreams … who might say why Phoebus Apollo is so angry."

HOMER, *ILIAD* (1.62–67)

INTERPRETING DIVINE WILL

divination in ancient Greece

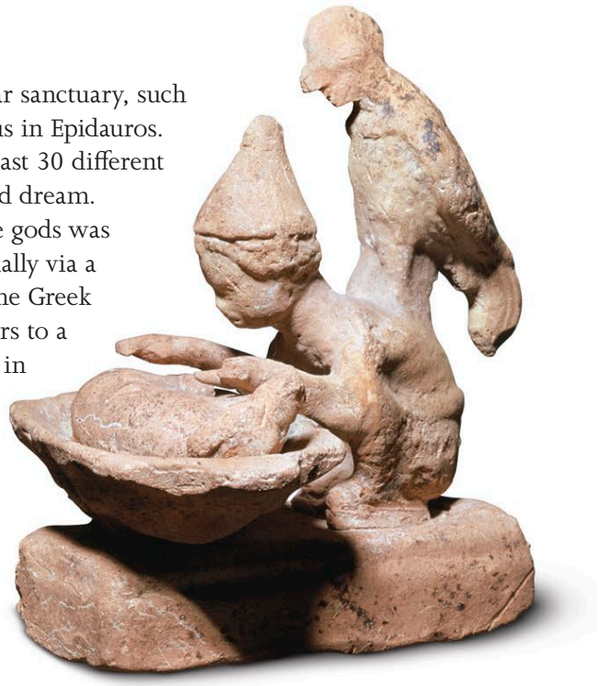
The ancient Greeks constantly sought to understand the will of the gods by reading signs in natural events, animals, or objects, or by attempting to communicate directly with them. In a world where it seemed all too easy to anger the gods and for terrible punishments to befall mortals who did, Greeks were anxious to divine the intentions of the gods and learn how to win their favor.

Diviners and oracles

The practice of divination was first recorded in the *Iliad*, a poem about the Trojan War. In it, the hero Achilles suggests consulting a "reader of dreams" to learn why the god Apollo was angry with the Greeks.

There were various ways to seek out divine will. Specialist diviners observed the flight of birds (ornithomancy)—a bird flying high, and with outstretched wings, was a good omen; or the livers of sacrificial animals (hepatomancy)—any abnormalities were a bad sign. The gods could also answer a question by the way diviners drew lots or cast knucklebones, or by indicating letters on an alphabet board with a swinging ring suspended on a thread. Closer contact with the gods could be obtained by interpreting the dreams of someone sleeping in a particular sanctuary, such as that of the healing god Asclepius in Epidauros. The Greek Magical Papyri list at least 30 different rituals to obtain a divinely inspired dream.

The most direct approach to the gods was through oracles (godly advice, usually via a priestess). At shrines throughout the Greek world, priestesses delivered answers to a petitioner's questions, often while in a divine frenzy (the mania that gave Greek divination its name, *mantike*). The most famous shrine was at Delphi, where the Pythia, priestess of Apollo, gave advice while in an ecstasy inspired by fumes from an underground cave. Many cities petitioned the Delphic priestess on matters of state importance, though her oracular replies were cryptic. When in 546 BCE Croesus, king of Lydia, asked if he should engage in battle with the invading Persians, the response was that if he did so he would destroy a great empire. Croesus then assumed he should attack, but was so badly defeated that his own "empire" was destroyed.



▲ Extispicy
In this 6th-century BCE terra-cotta, a priest prepares to remove the entrails of a sacrificial pig to divine the future: this practice was known as extispicy.

IN CONTEXT

Pythagoras and numerology

The 6th-century BCE Greek mathematician Pythagoras and his followers believed that the universe was intimately connected with numbers, and that by understanding them past events could be understood and future ones divined. Some numbers had special properties: 2 and 3 were considered male and female, and their sum, 5, was associated with marriage; the addition of 1, 2, 3, and 4 made the perfect number, 10 (the same as the number of heavenly bodies), and was particularly auspicious. A later technique, attributed to Pythagoras, assigned a number to each letter of the alphabet; adding up those of a specific name gave a magical insight into that name.



Pythagoras (right) works at a counting board in a calculation competition with Boethius, who uses written Hindu-Arabic numbers, watched over by the figure of Arithmetic.

Greek magic and myth

The myths retold in Homer's epics, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and in tragic plays, reflect the ancient Greeks' fascination with magic. The stories include the full range of magic, from prophecies and curses to sacrifices, animal and human. For example, one tells how at the start of the Trojan War Iphigenia, daughter of King Agamemnon, was sacrificed to the goddess Artemis. Dark magic plays a key role in these tales, too. Odysseus, for instance, held a necromantic rite by slaughtering a black ram in order to attract the ghosts of the dead with whom he wished to commune. Another hero, Orpheus, could charm animals with his lyre, a skill he used to lull Cerberus, the triple-headed hell-hound that guarded the gates of Hades (the underworld), to sleep, in an unsuccessful attempt to rescue his dead wife, Eurydice.

Even more potent were the witches, such as Circe, daughter of the sun god Helios, who turned Odysseus's companions into pigs by feeding them enchanted cheese. Odysseus only escaped their fate through counter-magic. Most skilled and terrible of all was Medea. Her feats included giving her future husband, Jason, a magic lotion to shield him from fire-breathing bulls (guardians of the magical golden fleece); raising his father from the dead; and using enchanted fire to burn Creusa, for whom Jason abandoned her, to death. Dabbling in dark magic was known to have benefits but rarely ended well.

"I've bound my deceitful husband with the bonds of powerful oaths and curses."

MEDEA, IN **EURIPIDES**' PLAY *MEDEA*, 431 BCE



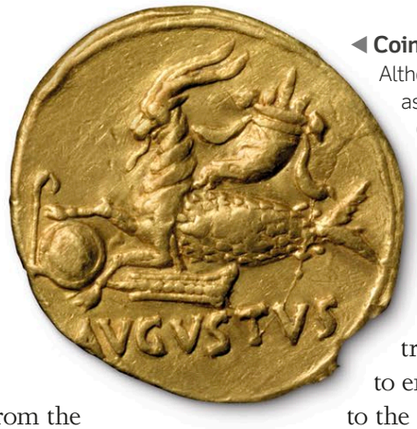


▲ **In this Roman mosaic**, Odysseus is tied to the mast to save him from the Sirens, monstrous bird-women whose sweet voices lured sailors to their doom.

STATE POWER, SCIENCE, AND SUPERSTITION

Roman magic

As well as having their own magical beliefs, the Romans inherited from the ancient Greeks a sense that magic was a means to gain agency over the gods. Yet under Roman rule, the division between official religion and magic hardened, and there was outright persecution for practitioners of magic.



◀ Coin of Augustus
Although Emperor Augustus expelled astrologers from Rome, he still put Capricorn (the ruling sign of his own horoscope) on coins as a symbol of his renewal of the Roman state (just as Capricorn marks the return of the sun following the winter solstice).

State and sorcery

Much Roman magic was inherited from the people who lived in ancient Italy before the Romans: for example, the important role of the *haruspex*—the priest who made predictions from the form and coloration of animals' livers—shows a powerful Etruscan influence on the early Roman magical tradition. Making public sacrifices to ensure the city's safety dated back to the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, as did augury (reading omens from weather patterns, the flight of birds, or the entrails of sacrificial animals). Under the Roman Republic from 509 BCE, both became official practices of the Roman state.

After the Roman conquest of Greece in the 2nd century BCE, the Greek belief in "binding magic" (see p.34), including using curse tablets to ensure victory in competitions or over romantic rivals, began to permeate Roman culture. Amulets also became more common (notably the *bulla*, a phallus-shaped charm worn by all Roman boys as a protection against the evil eye).

Even emperors were thought to benefit from magic. In 180 CE, when Emperor Marcus Aurelius attacked the Germanic Quadi on the Danube, his troops were saved from dying of thirst by a downpour supposedly invoked by Arnouphis, an Egyptian magician. Emperors also consulted the Sibylline Books, a collection of predictions said to have been acquired in around 520 BCE from the Sibyl, a prophetess who lived in a cave at Cumae, near Naples. Kept in the temple of Capitoline Jupiter, these books were only consulted in times of crisis, such as after the Carthaginians defeated the Roman army at Cannae in 216 BCE, when priests interpreted the books and advised that it was necessary to sacrifice two Gauls and two Greeks. The four men were buried alive beneath the Forum Boarium, the city's ancient marketplace.



▼ Bull sacrifice
Emperor Marcus Aurelius presides over the sacrifice of a bull in gratitude for a victory in the Marcomannic Wars (166–180 CE). In this relief the *flamen* (priest) stands to the emperor's right, and the *victimarius*, who will actually kill the animal, stands to the far right bearing an ax.



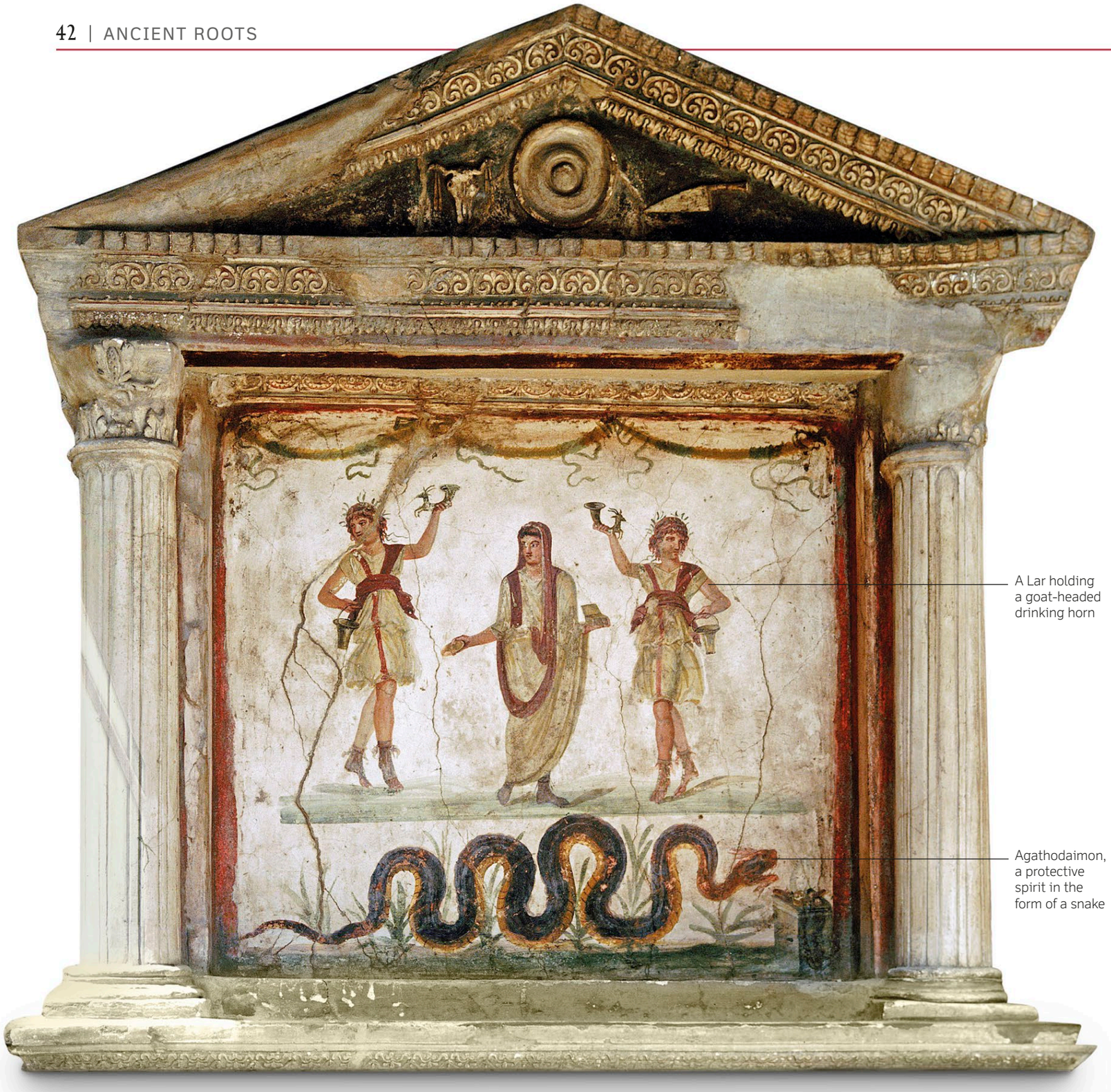
Popular magic and astrology

Magic merged with philosophy and mystery cults (see pp.44–45) as an interest in esoteric belief systems grew among well-heeled Romans. These beliefs included Pythagoreanism (see p.37); the worship of Isis; and Hermeticism (see pp.134–135), a branch of the philosophical school of Neoplatonism that ascribed the creation of the physical world to a female power named Hecate. Yet on the teeming streets of Rome, which had about a million inhabitants under the early empire in the 1st century CE, other forms of magic also thrived. For every aristocratic scholar of the occult there were hundreds of soothsayers, *praecantrices* (female sorceresses who sold love potions and performed simple healing rituals), and popular astrologers.

▲ **Evil eye mosaic**
This mosaic from Antioch shows the evil eye attacked by wild animals and stabbed with weapons. While the eye was defending itself from the assault, it was hoped that it would not turn its gaze on the household.

"Magic rose to such a height that even today it has sway over a great part of mankind."

PLINY THE ELDER, *NATURAL HISTORY*, c. 77–79 CE



▲ **Household spirit**
This altar from a house in Pompeii shows the *genius* (presiding deity) of the household making a sacrifice to the Lares, protective ancestral spirits who kept their domain safe from the *larvae* (malicious ghosts).

Astrology straddled the divide between popular and aristocratic magic. Nigidius Figulus, a prominent scholar and friend of the statesman Cicero, wrote a book on Egyptian astrology, which was at the root of many Roman practices. Even the eminent astronomer Claudius Ptolemy (whose theory of planetary spheres and an Earth-centered solar system would last until the Renaissance) pointed out that just as the tides were affected by the moon, so the motion of the planets would, intuitively, influence the behavior of men.

Surviving Roman horoscopes include few actual predictions, but astrologers did provide them. They were based on a belief that the soul, in descending to Earth for its birth, acquired certain traits from the planetary spheres such as cunning from Saturn;

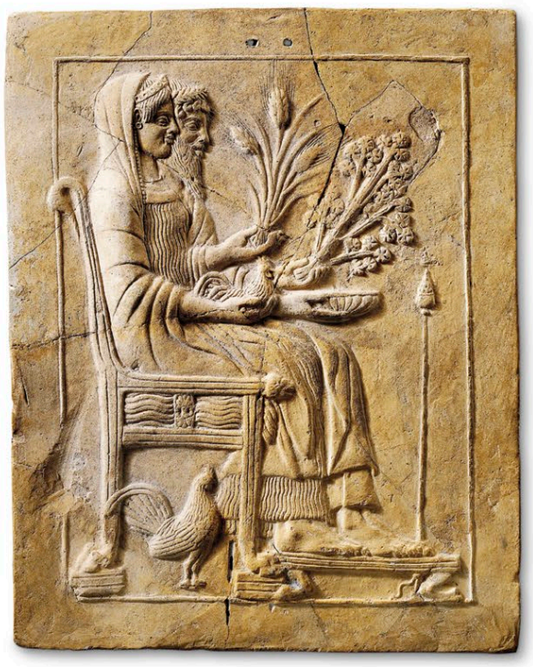
"She inhabited deserted tombs, and haunted graves from which the ghosts had been driven."

LUCAN, *PHARSALIA*, 61–65 CE

martial spirit from Mars; oratory from Mercury; and ruling power from Jupiter. Predictions also caused the astrologers' downfall: in 16 CE a horoscope foretelling that Drusus Libo, a well-connected but dissolute aristocrat, might one day become emperor led to his arrest (and then suicide before his trial). In the aftermath of the scandal, all astrologers were expelled from Rome—part of a string of such purges, which had also taken place in 139 and 33 BCE; there were to be more in 69 and 89 CE.

Magic and the law

The Romans' fear of harmful magic ran deep. The Twelve Tablets of 451 BCE, Rome's first law code, prohibited spiriting away a neighbor's crops, and the Lex Cornelia of 81 BCE tightened up penalties for *veneficium* (malign magic). There were periodic mass arrests: in 331 BCE, 170 women were executed for giving out magical poison potions, while after Tiberius's arrest of Libo in 16 CE, 45 men and 85 women were executed for contravening laws on magic. Even high-profile Romans could fall foul of the law; in 158 CE the philosopher Apuleius of Madura was tried for using magic to seduce a rich widow, and only his eloquent defense speech acquitted him.



▶ **Votive to Persephone**
On this terra-cotta votive (religious offering) from southern Italy, Persephone is shown bearing a sheaf of wheat, a symbol of the renewed life brought by her annual return from the underworld in spring. As Queen of the land of the dead, she was often invoked in magical prayers and curses.

Necromancy

Some Romans practiced an even more feared form of magic. When Germanicus, adoptive son of Tiberius, died suddenly in 19 CE, rumor linked his death to magic. His room was said by investigators to be full of curse tablets, spells, and the remains of burned bodies. The latter was a sign of necromancy—magic involving the dead, who, it was held, passed messages to the gods and saw the future. Emperors with cruel reputations were rumored to use necromancy, too: Nero was said to have conjured the ghost of his mother, whom he had murdered, to beg her forgiveness.



IN CONTEXT

The fictional witch

The terrifying power of witches was a common theme in Roman literature. In Lucan's *Pharsalia* the witch Erichtho revivifies a corpse by pouring fresh blood and the spit of rabid dogs into it, while the poet Horace recounts the deeds of Canidia and her companion Sagana, whose activities include the kidnap and murder of children. With their horrific looks and renown for performing disgusting rituals, these fictional sorceresses are the literary ancestors of medieval witches.

Three witches prepare to receive a client in this Pompeii mosaic.

SHROUDED IN SECRECY

mystery cults



▲ **Eleusinian initiation**
In this plaque, a worshipper is initiated into the cult of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Part of the ceremony re-created the search by the goddess Demeter for her daughter Kore, who had been kidnapped by Hades and taken to the underworld.

Commoners of the ancient Roman world were denied participation in the public temple rituals, so many turned to mystery cults—unofficial religions that would accept them. Mystery cults offered a direct relationship with the gods, the hope of a better afterlife, and social bonds.

Mystery cults thrived in part because the Romans were unusually open to foreign religions. Their main quality was secrecy, both around initiation into the cult, which acted as a mystical rebirth, and its rituals. The most venerable cult was the Eleusinian Mysteries, which honored Demeter, the goddess of harvest, fertility, and cycles of life and death. The Mysteries centered on the town of Eleusis, near Athens. Their main ceremony was the annual eight-day festival during which would-be initiates engaged in a simulated descent into Hades (the underworld) through a dark wood, from which they were rescued by priests with torches.



▶ **Cybele with a cymbal**
The goddess Cybele, also called Magna Mater (great mother), is shown on this votive plaque. She holds a cymbal and has two lions with her, symbols of her links to the wildness of nature and the noisy frenzy of her worship.

▶ **Dionysian rites**
The frescoes in the Villa of Mysteries in Pompeii show an initiation into the cult of Dionysus. One rite involved reenacting the marriage of Dionysus to the mortal Ariadne, complete with a naked *maenad* (female follower) dancing.

Wine and lunar raptures

Initiates of the Italian cult of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, engaged in *teletai*, rituals involving ecstatic dancing and singing, while carrying *thyrsoi*, fennel wands wrapped in ivy and topped with pinecones. The cult's activities particularly concerned the Roman authorities, who in 186 BCE tried to ban it.

Similar worries were expressed about the Cult of Magna Mater, derived from the worship of the Asiatic moon goddess Cybele and her consort Attis. Her worshippers, the Korybantes, used clashing cymbals to rouse themselves to a euphoric frenzy, and the most enthusiastic male worshippers even castrated themselves.

Percussion and sacrifice

The cult of the Egyptian goddess Isis had its own temple in Rome by 65 CE. Its priests valued ritual purity highly, shaving their heads and dressing in linen, although they, too, engaged in noisy rites using the *sistrum*, a percussion instrument.

Most widespread and secretive of all was the cult of Mithras. Emerging in the 1st century CE, it derived indirectly from Persian beliefs and its main ritual was the tauroctony (bull sacrifice), in which the blood of the dying animal symbolized purity and rebirth. The all-male members were graded into seven ranks, from Corax (Raven) to Pater (Father), and initiates worshipped Mithras in *mithraea*, underground rectangular temples simulating caves. Mithraism flourished throughout the Roman Empire, but it, along with all the other mystery cults, was suppressed when the Empire became Christian in the 4th century.



Healing plants

Since prehistoric times, people have believed in the special powers of plants to help and heal. On one level, they have been used as medicines, and the therapeutic qualities of many herbs, long known through practice, have now often been verified by science. The herbal (book of properties of herbs) was the healer's equivalent of the modern doctor's drug guide. It has also long been believed that many plants have magical powers beyond their ability to cure—for instance, bringing love, money, or protection from the evil eye.



▲ **Apple blossom** and apples are linked to many goddesses, including Aphrodite and Freya, and seen as the fruit of love and immortality.



▲ **Sage** belongs to the genus *Salvia,* which is Latin for healing or rescue, and was once widely regarded as the best herb for treating fevers. Some believed it could also bring immortality or wisdom.



▲ **Rosemary**, signifying remembrance, has been placed in graves of loved ones since ancient Roman times. The herb was also thought to ward off evil spirits and witches.



▲ **Bamboo** is considered to have magical properties for promoting good health and long life. Bamboo wands were used by Taoists to summon water deities.



▲ **Basil** is believed to calm the mind and bring happiness. It is also linked to money, and so it is used in spells to create wealth. Carrying a basil leaf in your wallet is said to help attract riches.



▲ **Aloe vera** is hung over doors in Africa and the Middle East to bring good luck and drive away evil. Medically, the plant is used to treat wounds, burns, and skin irritations.



▲ **Absinthe** is aniseed-flavored alcohol made from wormwood and herbs, including green anise and fennel, all ground to a paste in a pestle and mortar—one of the prime tools of the herbalist.



▲ **Patchouli** is an herb with a strong, earthy scent and is linked to passion, love, and riches. It is used as an aphrodisiac and in spells to bring wealth.



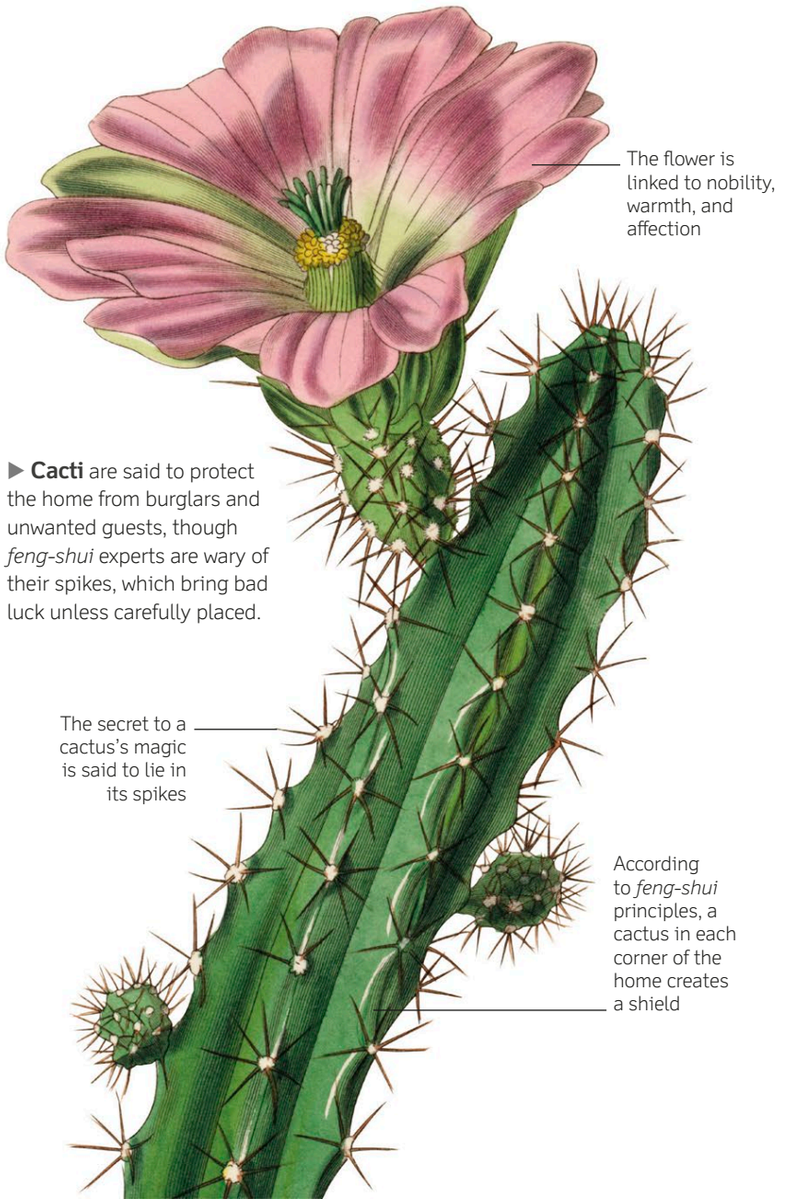
▲ **Chamomile** is valued by magicians and healers alike. It is said to protect the home from evil magic and bring wealth. As a tea, it is a sedative and mood enhancer.



▲ **Lavender** is linked to peace and love, used in incense as a purifier, and added to midsummer fires in Wiccan festivals. As an essential oil, it can improve sleep.



▲ **Chrysanthemum** is linked to fire and the sun's energy, and it is used at Samhain (a quarterly Celtic festival) and on Wiccan altars. In Chinese medicine, it is said to detox and lower blood pressure.



▶ **Cacti** are said to protect the home from burglars and unwanted guests, though *feng-shui* experts are wary of their spikes, which bring bad luck unless carefully placed.

ELIXIRS OF LIFE AND DEATH

ancient Chinese magic



From its roots in ancestor worship, Chinese magic developed into a sophisticated philosophical system that acknowledged the need to achieve balance in the cosmos; magic was a way for individuals to gain a personal advantage within the universe. From as early as the Yangshao period (5000–3000 BCE), ceramics depicted anthropomorphic (resembling humans) creatures thought to represent sorcerers.

The first Chinese magicians were *wu* (shamans), able to communicate with ancestors and spirits. By the Shang Dynasty (1600–1050 BCE), the *wu* appeared to have a more formal role in the interpretation of oracles. A shaman named Wu Xian was reported to have been in charge of divination at the court of Tang, the first Shang ruler. The *Zhouli* (a Chinese ritual text), also refers to Managers of the Spirit Mediums, who supervised the work of the *wu*. The *wu*—who were often female—performed rituals to send themselves into an ecstatic trance in which they aimed to travel to the spirit world. They also acted as healers and dream interpreters, and were thought to have powers over nature, such as the ability to invoke rain through special dance rituals in times of drought.

Necromancy and popular magic

However, the monopoly of the *wu* did not last. *Wu* were alleged to have been involved in scandals such as Empress Chen Jia's use of *wugu* (dark magic). She was convicted and 300 *wu* were executed. Such accusations increased the *wu*'s association with witchcraft. After the Warring States Period (403–221 BCE), new forms of shaman, the *xi*, who were all male, appeared, and the *wu* were marginalized.

◀ Wooden shaman figure
This is one half of a pair of *wu* tomb attendants from the Chu kingdom, one of the Warring States. It dates from the 4th or 3rd century BCE. The kingdom continued to practice shamanism long after other parts of China stopped, perhaps influenced by the shamans of northeast Asia and Siberia.

Officials called *shi* had long had a role in rituals honoring the dead, in which the spirit of the deceased was channeled through their body in a kind of necromancy, and *chi* (who uttered incantations) came to play the role of priests. Over time, the use of incantations, spells, and potions (especially love philters) devolved to folk magic, in which charms and amulets were used to invoke gods or summon ancestors. Magic also came to be used alongside conventional medicine as substances such as amber and peach wood, believed to have magical curative properties, were employed.

From shamans to sorcery

Accusations that they were involved in *ku* (casting harmful spells) played a part in the downfall of the *wu*. Fears of sorcerers employing dark magic, in particular for poisoning, had first appeared in oracle





▶ Magic bronze mirror, Tang Dynasty
The front of this mirror has a shiny, reflective surface but the back, shown here, has a design cast on it. When the sun or a light shines on the front surface, the mirror becomes transparent and, as if by magic, the pattern on the back can be projected onto a wall behind it.

inscriptions in the Shang Dynasty. By the time of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) ku was so widespread that it became punishable by death. Ku practitioners were believed to be able to pass disease into a victim's body (ku can be translated as "worms in the belly") or to poison people outright. The most effective venom was said to be obtained by sealing several toxic creatures, such as scorpions, centipedes, and snakes, in a jar and extracting the poison from the one that survived. Ku sorcerers were also said to sometimes turn their targets into slaves utterly obedient to their will. They were able to inflict even wider damage by unleashing the wug, a magical pest that could destroy whole harvests of grain.

"Those who dare to poison people with *ku* … will be publicly executed."

ZHOULI ("RITES OF ZHOU"), c.300 BCE



Demons out and about
In this painted scroll, several grotesque demons parade through the countryside. They are the retinue of Zhong Kui, a legendary magician known as the Demon Queller, who was said to have cured Emperor Xuanzong in the 8th century CE of a fever by slaying a demon inside the ruler's dream.



◀ Peaches of immortality
On this vase, a group of immortals offer peaches grown by the Queen Mother of the West on the sacred Mt. Kunlun. Reportedly, the peaches ripened only once every 6,000 years and Emperor Wu of Han was one of the few mortals to have tasted them.

In pursuit of eternal life

From around 300 BCE *fangshi* (recipe masters) developed a reputation as seers and purveyors of elixirs that would guarantee immortality. They were of particular interest to the emperors, who could afford to fund the *fangshi*'s experiments, but the results were not always beneficial.

Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor, became obsessed with the search for eternal life. He sent demands to regional governors to despatch rare herbs back to the capital and neglected the business of government later in his reign. In the end, his patronage of the *fangshi* was deadly—he ingested a pill one of them prescribed that contained poisonous mercury, collapsed, and died.

Immortality and alchemy

Many Chinese alchemists sought to transform one substance into another by altering the balance of the Five Elements (considered in China to be Earth, Wood, Metal, Fire, and Water). The idea of achieving perfection, and so harmony with the cosmos, was of particular appeal to Daoist masters, who developed distinct schools of alchemy.

Weidan (external alchemy) was one school. It resembled the European quest to change base metals into gold, although the Daoists viewed this transformation as a metaphor for immortality. Like the potions of the *fangshi*, their elixirs were keenly sought by emperors seeking eternal life. Another school, *Neidan* (internal alchemy), aimed for spiritual refinement and immortality, through meditation, breathing exercises, and a good diet to improve the body's store of *qi* (vital energy).

Followers of both Daoism and Confucianism, and to an extent Buddhism, sought order, or at least a grasp of how the world was structured. They developed a notion of complementary opposites, *yin* (the dark or passive aspect of things) and *yang* (the light and active component), which needed to be in perfect harmony. When combined with the Five Elements and the movements of the planets (themselves interconnected—for instance, Wood for Jupiter and Fire for Mars), the forces of *yin* and *yang* produced a complex system of balance. Astrologers interpreted this system to foretell the future, while magicians sought to control and manipulate it.



▲ Daoist alchemist
A Daoist master watches as a miraculous elixir of immortality separates out on the tripod in this woodcut from a Qing Dynasty alchemical text published in 1605.

IN PRACTICE

Stone of immortality

Jade was prized in China from Neolithic times onward for its durability and its lustrous green sheen. Jade objects first appeared around 3000 BCE and, by the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, had become formalized into a series of ritual shapes, including *bi* (flat disks) and *cong* (tubular containers). Over time, jade became strongly associated with imperial power. It was sharpened into blades or crafted into ceremonial suits made up of pieces of jade joined with wire or silk. The suits encased members of the royal family in death when they were buried, as the stone was believed to slow the decay of flesh. Jade had purely magical uses, too: sorcerers used it to create amulets to ward off bad luck, and Daoist alchemists ground it up to mix with their elixirs.



This jade pendant was made in the 3rd century BCE, during the Zhou Dynasty.

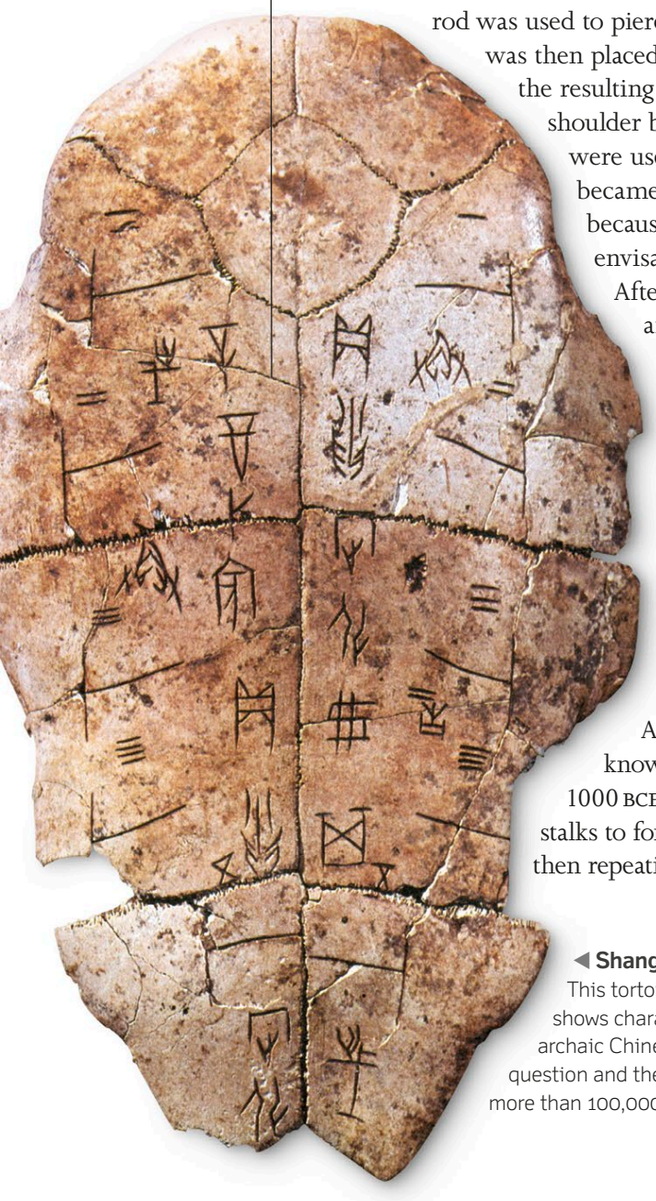
ENSURING COSMIC HARMONY

Chinese divination

Rulers in ancient China believed their futures were preordained by a divine will. To determine how best to align their actions with what fate had decreed, they used various kinds of divination.

Fire and bones

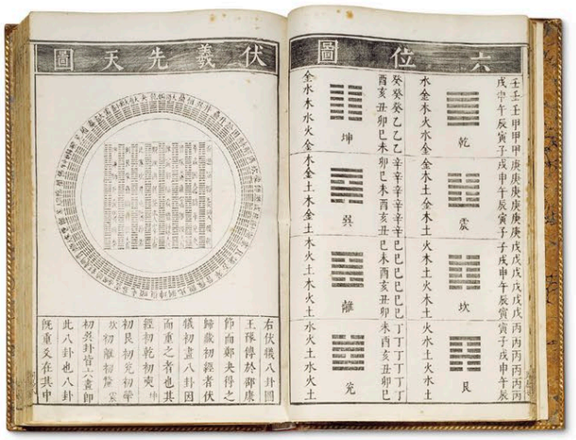
The earliest form of Chinese divination, dating back to before the start of the Shang Dynasty in 1600 BCE, made use of fire and bones. A heated rod was used to pierce the bone or shell, which was then placed in a fire. A seer interpreted the resulting pattern of cracks. At first the shoulder bones of oxen, sheep, or horses were used, but later tortoise shells became more common, perhaps because their shape helped diviners envisage the dome of heaven. After divination, the question and the seer's interpretation were inscribed on the shell. Surviving oracle bones are a vital source of information about the Shang Dynasty. They reveal the identity of at least 140 interpreters, who were among the earliest magicians for whom we have a name.



◀ Shang Dynasty oracle bone
This tortoise shell, used as an oracle bone, shows characteristic cracking patterns and the archaic Chinese characters that reveal both the question and the diviner's interpretation. There are more than 100,000 surviving oracle bones.

Cleromancy

A new form of divination now known as cleromancy began around 1000 BCE. This involved casting yarrow stalks to form either a solid or broken line, then repeating this action to form six rows.



▲ Cleromancy in the *I Ching*
This Ming Dynasty edition of the *I Ching*, published in 1615, shows the complete set of 64 hexagrams on the left-hand page, and the name and interpretations of specific hexagrams on the right-hand page.

The resulting 64 possible hexagrams (each with names such as "cauldron" or "little harvest") were interpreted in relation to a petitioner's question. This method of divination, linked to astrology, was preserved in the classic text Zhou Yi around 800 BCE; a more definitive compilation, the *I Ching*, made in the 2nd century BCE, had a huge influence as a divinatory text and as a work of philosophy.

In harmony with the landscape

In both cleromancy and divination by oracle bones, experts interpreted patterns created by human intervention. In *feng shui* (Chinese geomancy), practitioners read patterns that existed in nature, identifying features in a landscape that would lead to good or bad fortune for humans dwelling there. Burial in a grave sited in a spot where vital energy had accumulated was thought to bring the deceased's descendants good luck. On a larger scale, emperors employed *feng shui* masters to find promising sites for new cities. An isolated promontory could be vulnerable to malevolent influences, while hills might enclose and protect a site and bring blessings to the inhabitants.





KEY

1 Stacked lines are used for cleromancy.

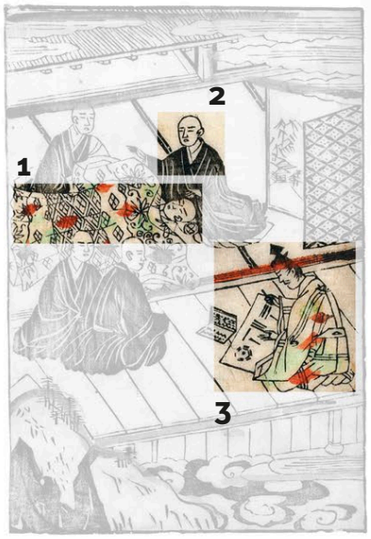
2 The northwest sector governs spring and helpful people.

3 North is at the bottom (the four compass points are shown upside down from a Western perspective).

◀ ***Feng shui* and astrology**
This *bagua* (eight symbols) or *feng shui* energy map is divided into sectors according to the cardinal directions, with south at the top. Each sector governs a season, an element, and an aspect of life such as health, wealth, or family.

"A man without constancy cannot be a diviner either with the tortoise shell or the stalks."

CONFUCIUS IN *LIJI*, C. 5TH CENTURY BCE



KEY

1 The monk Shika is on his deathbed.

2 A young monk, Shoku, offers to give up his own life to save his master.

3 Abe no Seimei casts lots and looks up their meaning to see the future.

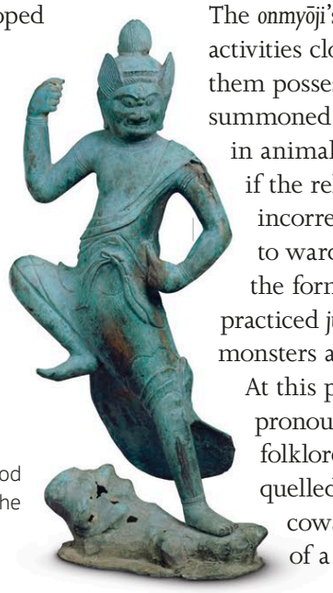
▶ **Divining death**
In this woodblock print, revered *onmyōji* Abe no Seimei consults an astrological work to foretell the imminent demise of the monk Shika.

MINISTRY OF MAGIC

ancient Japanese magic

In Japan's traditional Shinto religion, almost everything—trees, rivers, mountains, and even buildings—was host to *kami*, resident spirits whose powers could be harnessed or anger appeased by specialists. The *kitsune-tsukai* (witches possessed by fox spirits) were a particularly powerful form of *kami*. They could change shape, become invisible, or even possess others. In the 5th and 6th centuries BCE, Buddhism, Daoism, and the Chinese systems of the Five Elements and yin-yang were introduced to Japan and merged with Shinto. In response to all these influences, and to ascertain the will of *kami*, the Japanese developed a complex system of divination.

Occult practitioners called the *onmyōji* performed divination rituals and read omens from the stars and unusual phenomena such as eclipses. They even carried out exorcisms by summoning a spirit to enter the victim's body and interrogate the possessing spirit to identify it. Then they could perform the correct ritual to expel the unwanted spirit. The *onmyōji* became court officials, and *onmyōdō* (their practice) became so accepted that there was even a Divination Bureau to appoint them. The practice of *monoimi*, the decision whether or not to accept visitors based on the *onmyōji*'s findings, and *henbai*, rituals to protect court members while traveling, continued until Emperor Meiji came to power in 1868 and banned them.



▶ **Buddhist mountain deity**
This bronze statue shows Zaō Gongen, a god associated with remote mountains, where he was worshipped by hermits who practiced *jugondo* to acquire his physical power.

Witches, charms, and folk magic

The *onmyōji*'s repertoire also included activities close to sorcery. Many of them possessed *shikigami*, spirit familiars summoned as servants, who often appeared in animal form, and could be vengeful if the relevant ritual was performed incorrectly. *Onmyōji* employed charms to ward off evil called *ofuda*, often in the form of hanging paper strips. Some also practiced *jugondo*, which dealt with vanquishing monsters and healing diseases.

At this popular level of magic, the grand pronouncements of the *onmyōji* veered into folklore. People believed that a storm could be quelled by burning the pelt of a black dog, or cowardice cured by chewing the shavings of a tree that had been struck by lightning.



▲ **Star and planet rituals**
This drawing from a Japanese astrological text is of Doyō, the deity linked with Saturn and the last day of the week—which was associated with illness and arguments, and believed to be a bad day to get married.

ABE NO SEIMEI (921–1005)

Mainstream magic

The most famous *onmyōji*, Abe no Seimei specialized in analyzing odd events and performing exorcisms. The author of several works on fortune-telling, he gained favor at court by telling the sex of unborn noble babies and became head of the Divination Bureau, which his clan controlled until the 19th century. He acquired a name for his mystical powers, said to have come from his *kitsune-tsukai* mother, a status he confirmed in an epic series of magical duels with his rival Doman Ashiya. In one episode, Doman hid 15 oranges in a box and challenged Abe to divine what was in it. Abe transformed the oranges in the box into rats and guessed their number correctly.





▶ **Miraculous rain**
This Mughal miniature shows Indra, a sky god and the most popular deity in Vedic times, fighting Vritra, a demonic personification of drought. At the end of their battle, Indra cut open Vritra's stomach with the *vajra*, his magic thunderbolt, releasing the waters back down to the earth.

LORE OF THE PANTHEON

ancient Hindu magic

Over the long history of Hinduism, a complex pantheon and set of philosophical beliefs arose. Followers developed a number of incantations and rituals that they believed provided a way to influence and appease the *devas* (gods) and access their divine world.

Gods and demons

Hinduism is thought to have begun among the Aryan peoples who established themselves in northern India after the Indus Valley civilization faded away in around 1500 BCE. A warrior people with a love of music and drink, the Aryans worshipped a sky god called Varuna, and drank *soma*, a ritual drink made by extracting the juice from a plant of the same name. They believed that the drink granted immortality, stimulated courage, and cured diseases. Later, from about 1500–500 BCE, Hindus developed a set of scriptures called the *Vedas* which include accounts of the birth of the universe, battles between heroes and demons, and invocations to *devas*. Over time the caste system emerged, with Brahmin priests, the highest-ranking caste, passing their role from father to son. They ensured that people followed rituals and performed sacrifices in the prescribed manner.

Hindu scriptures

In the *Vedas*, the *devas* were identified with positive power, and their adversaries the *asuras* (demons) with destructive force. The powers of the *asuras* were often said to be great—the demon Maricha, for instance, transformed himself into a gazelle to



trick Rama (a manifestation of the god Vishnu). Magic in the Hindu world became connected with *maya*, a concept originally meaning power or wisdom, but later embodying illusion—the gap between human perception and the ever-changing, unstable material world.

Magical texts

Just like their counterparts in other belief systems, many Hindus sought direct means to achieve divine intervention. The *Atharvaveda*, composed around 1200–1000 BCE, contains 730 hymns and 6,000 mantras attributed to the sages Atharvan (who authored some core hymns), Angiras, and Bhrigu.

As well as containing hymns to secure long life, heal wounds, fight off devils, or procure a marriage partner, the *Atharvaveda* refers to amulets, suggesting that their use was widespread. The book mentions that one such amulet came from the splinters of 10 holy trees that could protect against demonic possession.

There were other more spectacular examples of magic—in the texts, if not in real life—with accounts of spiritually evolved *tantriks* (occultists), who used practices such as hypnosis to create illusions. The *Atharvaveda* gives reminders of older, possibly shamanic traditions, too, such as the use of *ojhas* (exorcists) and the worship of Agni, the god of fire, who was believed to purify the souls of the dead and take them from the pyre to be reborn.

IN CONTEXT

Magic as entertainment

In the 20th century, India developed a reputation as a cradle of magical performance, and illusionists such as P.C. Sorcar, Sr., and Vazhakunnam (dubbed the "Father of Magic") became especially popular. Among their signature turns was the *Cheppum Panthum* (Cups and Balls trick, in which balls are made to randomly appear and disappear), and the Indian Rope Trick, in which the magician appears to climb a levitating length of rope. A version of the Indian Rope Trick was first described by the Arab traveler Ibn Battuta back in the 14th century.



Street magicians perform the Indian Rope Trick for an audience of British soldiers in the 1940s.



◀ Divine protection
In this scene from the Hindu epic called the *Mahabharata*, Queen Draupadi, whose husband has lost her in a game of dice, is disrobed. However, the god Krishna protects the queen's honor by magically creating more layers of cloth as each length of her sari is unwound.



▲ **Semi-divine ruler**
The king on this jade plaque is in full royal regalia to indicate his magical status. His shield shows the jaguar god of the underworld. Below him is a dwarf, considered by the Maya to be a living embodiment of maize.

THE COSMIC CYCLE

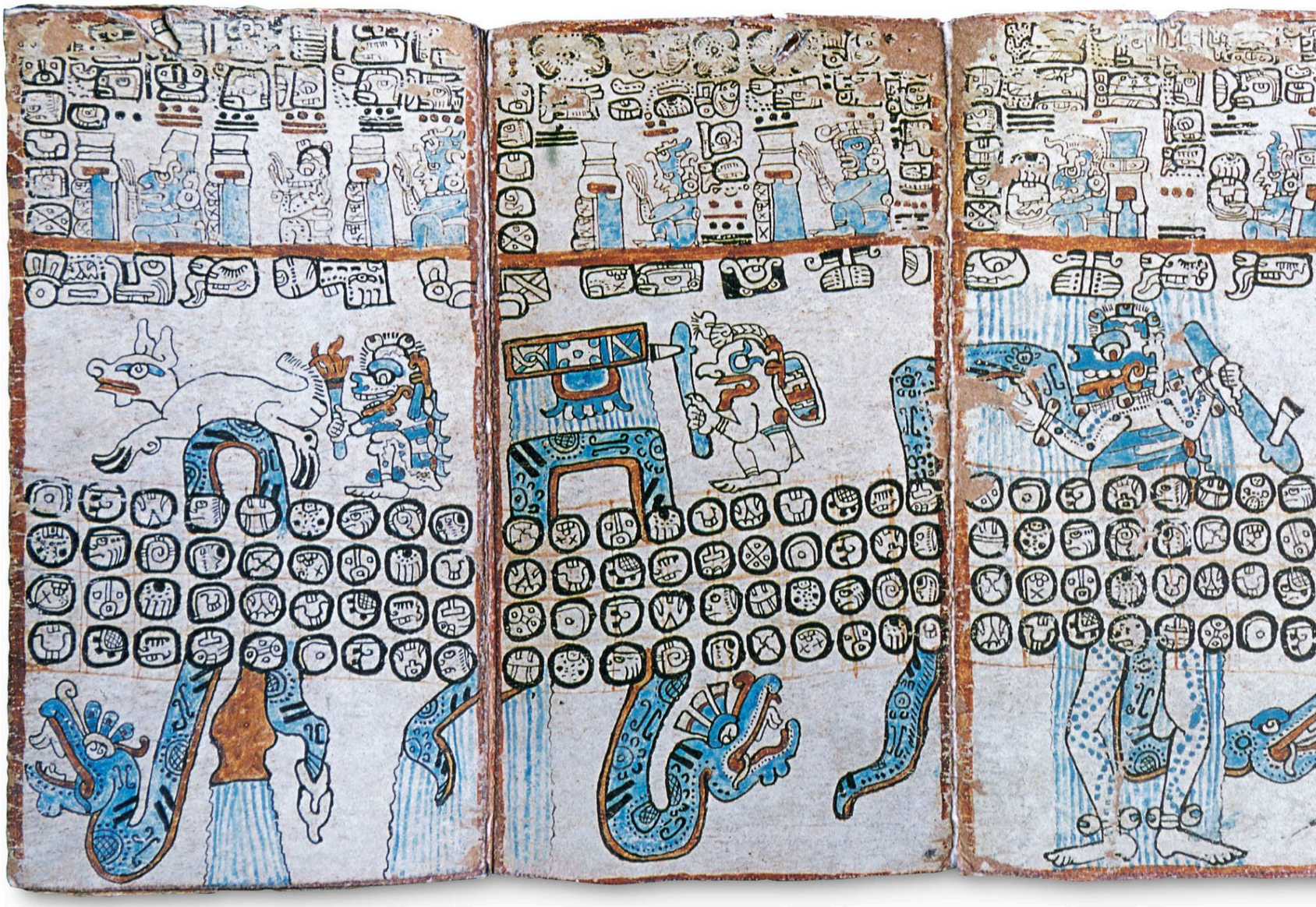
Mayan magic

The Maya—the indigenous people of Mexico and Central America—had a rich spiritual world. Almost every object, and even days of the week, were considered divine. Rituals and magic were the channels for communicating with the gods.

Living with the spirits

Mayan culture was at its height during the Classic Period, from c. 250 to 900 CE, when the Maya built vast pyramids, temples, and plazas in dozens of city-states. Their religious life was ordered, yet all-encompassing. Major deities included Chaac, the rain god, and the Maize God, whose specific name is now disputed, but his cycle of death (through harvesting) and rebirth (through seed) was seen to symbolize the Mayan human condition. Gods were honored with temples and inscriptions, and days of the week, cardinal directions, and even rocks were all believed to have spirits, too.

To mediate with this diverse world, the Maya turned to *ah kin* (shamans and priests), who had the power to enter the spirit world through the use of



chants and hallucinogens. The most effective intermediaries were members of the royal family. They were considered to be already semi-divine and able to call on the gods to favor their cities.

Appeasing the gods with blood

The Maya believed that humankind owed the gods a debt for their creation and that sacrifices acted as a form of repayment. The most powerful offering of all was blood. It could be that of war captives, who were decapitated on temple steps. Even better, the king himself cut his own flesh with sting-ray spines, and the drops of blood were caught on ritual paper and burned. Inhaling the smoke was believed to open up visions of the spirit world.



Such sacrifices were hoped to cure illnesses. For the Maya, damage to one of the several souls that each person was believed to possess caused disease. One soul was the *o'ohlis*—the spark embedded into all things by the creator god. Another was the *way ob*, the animal companion that shared every person's soul. Kings shared their souls with jaguars but were not restricted to one *way ob*: royalty and other magic-rich figures such as priests could have up to 13.



▲ Ritual bloodletting
This frieze shows Shield Jaguar II, king of the Mayan city of Yaxchilan from 681 to 742, holding a flaming torch over his wife, Lady K'abal Xook. She pierces her tongue with a thorn-studded rope in an act of blood sacrifice.

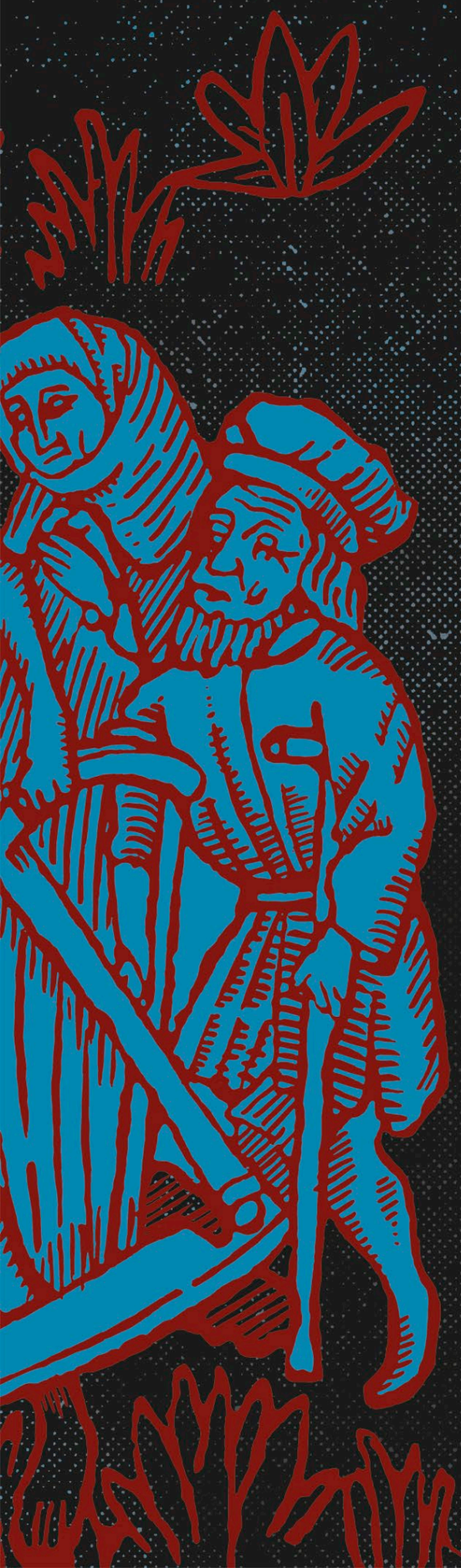
Telling the future

Time, place, and divinity were interwoven with a complex system of numbers, colors, and points of the compass. For the Maya, heaven had 13 layers above the earth. The underworld, where most souls ended up after death, was said to have nine, and each god four manifestations dependent on colors and cardinal directions. The Mayan year had a ritual calendar of 260 days and a secular one of 365 days, which coincided once each "calendar round" of 52 years.

Mayan priests were the guardians of the knowledge necessary to navigate this system. They compiled horoscopes and almanacs, making careful observations of heavenly bodies such as Venus and the moon. From their studies, they determined the auspicious days on which actions should be carried out. They also interpreted omens derived from the entrails of sacrificial animals or the patterns of grain thrown on to a surface, or looked for visions in a magical mirror. In a world where magic and the gods were ever-present, the need for the Maya to understand divine messages was all the more compelling.

◀ Madrid codex
Most Mayan books were destroyed after the Spanish conquest. The Madrid codex, one of the few survivors, contains almanacs and calendrical guides to assist Mayan priests in the performance of rituals.





CURSE OR CURE

400–1500

Introduction

The medieval period was a time of religious change across Europe and western Asia. When the Germanic leader Odoacer conquered Rome in 476 CE, the Roman Empire that had dominated the region for a thousand years finally disintegrated. In its wake ,two mighty new religions, Christianity and Islam, arose and in time dominated all others—Christianity in the West and Islam in the East.

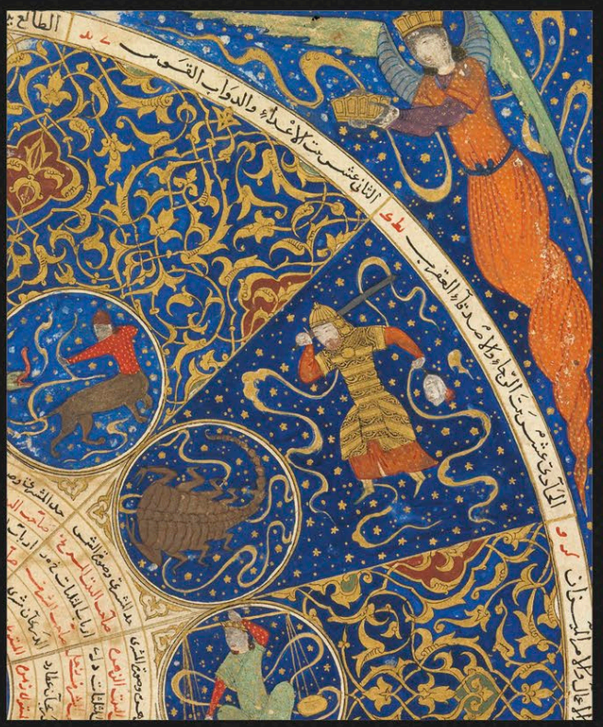
To both religions, ancient magical traditions seemed to challenge their authority and beliefs. Magic practitioners of all levels, from high priests and priestesses to monks and village healers or herdsmen, had often been the most revered figures in society. Now, however, they found themselves increasingly marginalized.

As Christianity spread north and west, high ceremonial magic, at least, was increasingly driven underground, or pushed to the far fringes of the Celtic and Viking worlds where pagan beliefs held fast for many centuries. Supernatural powers such as control of the elements and the weather—so important in rural farming communities—were appropriated by the Church for saints. In the meantime, powerful practitioners of magic were literally demonized: they were portrayed as owing their abilities to the Devil. They were described as practicing *sortilegium* (sorcery) or *maleficium* (evil deeds). The punishments for such practices became severe. In 789 CE, for instance, the Emperor Charlemagne issued the General Admonition, whereby sorcerers and enchanters were condemned to death.

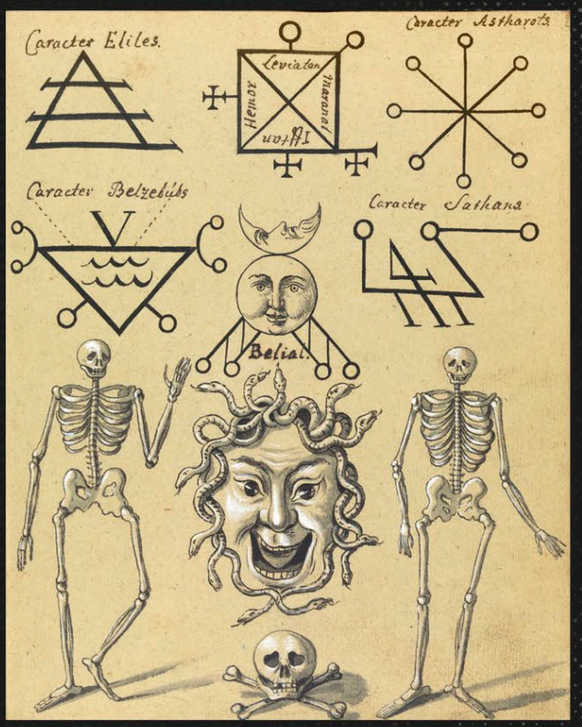
For many centuries, however, folk magic was tolerated, and village healers continued to practice much as they had before. Nevertheless, sermons urged people to prayer, and condemned the use of invocations and talismans, or the preparation of potions. Some argued that using the magical powers of herbs and stones was simply drawing on natural



Gundestrup cauldron *see p.72*



Arabic nativity horoscope *see p.83*



Compendium of magic *see p.90*

powers of the cosmos, which many people believed in when they performed magical rituals to protect their crops or their health. But toward the end of the medieval era, the clergy began to take a harder line against such practices that they labeled witchcraft.

In the Islamic world, and even in Christian Byzantium, magic had a more ambiguous place. Just as in the Western Christian world, folk magic thrived. Muslims believed in fallen angels who had become demons and devilish spirits called *jinns*, and the use of talismans to protect against them was a part of everyday life—despite their condemnation in the Quran. The study of magic flourished, too—following the Quran's instruction to seek knowledge, scholars translated ritual magical texts, while the study of math and natural sciences went hand in hand with advances in alchemy, astrology, and other occult arts.

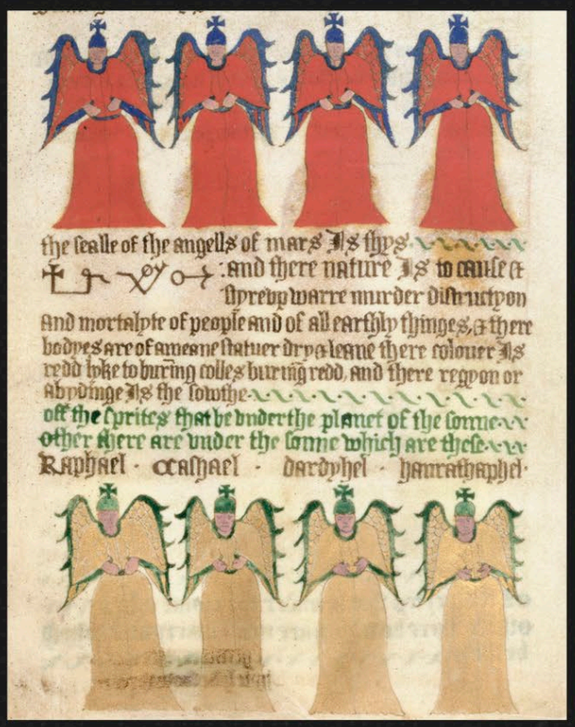
Many key magical works originated in the Islamic world. Latin translations, such as the book known as the *Picatrix*, circulated in Europe and inspired a new interest in magical beliefs and practices among scholars—one reason the modern image of wizards in literature owes more to Islamic scholarship than to native Celtic or Nordic traditions of magic.

"Fashion two images with the first face of Cancer rising, and Venus therein, and the Moon in the first face of Taurus …"

PICATRIX, BEGINNING OF A LOVE SPELL, 10TH OR 11TH CENTURY



Harvesting mandrake *see p.100*



Magical handbook on summoning angels *see p.109*



Trial by fire *see p.117*



▲ **Norse gods in Sweden**
The figures in the lower panel of this stone are thought to be the gods Odin, Thor, and Freyr because they hold their attributes—a spear, hammer, and sickle, respectively. The same gods appear in the upper panel.

THE WAND-CARRIERS

Norse magic

In the centuries before Scandinavia's conversion to Christianity, which began in the 8th century, its Nordic people developed a rich body of myths and pagan beliefs. In their eyes, the world was ruled by the Norns, supernatural female beings who controlled fate, and also by two sets of warring deities, the Aesir, dominated by the gods Odin and Thor, and the Vanir, who included Freyr and Freyja. The Norse people believed that the world was full of mythical creatures such as giants, elves, and dwarves, and that trees, rocks, rivers, and even homes were alive with *vaettir*—spirits and demons. In response to all these beings they developed an elaborate belief system with magical elements.

Norse magic lore was almost never written down at the time. It survives mainly in later sagas, which might be clouded by a Christian perspective, and from a few archaeological relics, such as runes.



▶ **Odin or a sorceress**
This tiny silver figurine from Denmark is said to be Odin with his two ravens and two wolves. However, some believe that the seated figure is a woman—either the goddess Freyja, credited with teaching Odin sorcery, or a *volva* (wand-carrier).

Seers and sorcery

At the heart of Norse magic lay *seidhr*—sorcery practiced mainly by women, one of the origins of the idea of witches in Europe. Men did practice it, too, but for them it was considered *argr* (effeminate and therefore shameful). *Seidhr* was shamanistic, involving visionary journeys and contact with the spirit world. Although the Norns were said to control fate, it was *seidhr* that gave the power to foresee and maybe reshape it. *Seidhr* practitioners were invited to gatherings to give people predictions about their future. They often used chanting and spells to contact the gods.

The most revered sorceresses were the *volva* (wand-carriers), expert practitioners of *seidhr* described as wearing long blue cloaks with hoods lined with white cat fur and black lamb's wool. *Volva* could play tricks with the mind and the memory—shape-shifting and making things invisible—or set curses on enemies. They were linked with Freyja, who was the goddess of love, sex, and beauty. It was Freyja who was said to have taught Odin the "unmanly" art of *seidhr*.

Controlling destiny

Nordic people believed in many Norns, all female. They included elves and dwarves, but the three main Norns lived at the well of Urd (Fate) in Asgard, the home of the gods. These three carried water from the well to refresh the great world tree Yggdrasil, which linked the realm of gods, people, giants, and the dead. The three sat by its roots spinning the threads of life to weave the destiny of every living being. Controlling fate made them even more powerful than the gods, and they could be a force for good and evil. The Norns were said to be present at the birth of every child to map out its destiny. A new mother was given *nornagretur* (norn porridge). Once she had tasted it, the rest was offered to the Norns to ensure a good future for her child. It is thought the three Norns inspired the witches in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, whose forecasts lead Macbeth into tragedy.

"An evil Norn
In olden days
Doomed me
In waters to dwell."

REGINSMÁL, c. 1270



▼ **Weaving fate**
The three Norns gather next to the rock of Brünnhilde (a Norse heroine), weaving the rope of destiny, in this illustration of the prologue to Part 4 of Richard Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, a set of operas based on Norse sagas.

"Make a Helm of Awe in lead, press the lead sign between the eyebrows, and speak the formula … Thus a man could meet his enemies and be sure of victory."

HEIMSKRINGLA, c. 1225



▲ Human sacrifice
A detail from one of the Stora Hammars picture stones in Gotland, Sweden, the center of this scene shows a small person lying face down on an altar, while a figure thought to be Odin brandishes a spear aloft. The magical *valknut* symbol of three interlocked triangles, associated with the transition from life to death, hovers over the prone figure.

As well as looking to sorceresses to foretell the future, the Norse people also searched for omens. Divination by lots was common: for example, if a fruit-tree branch was cut into tiny twigs and thrown randomly on a white cloth, it was said that the future could be read from the way the twigs fell.

The magic of nature

The Norse also used augury—the search for signs in nature. They thought that extreme natural events, such as storms and eclipses, could be messages from the gods, and that animals might carry messages, too. White horses were revered and kept in a sacred grove; when harnessed to a chariot left empty for the gods to drive, their path was said to reveal the gods' will. The flight of birds such as crows, ravens, or eagles could also be taken as signs, and seeing a raven before a battle was a good omen. When Floki Vilgerdarson, the first Norseman to deliberately sail to Iceland, set out in 867 he took three ravens as guides. Every so often he would release one raven, and plot his course according to which way the released bird flew.

Sacrifices

Keeping Odin and the other gods friendly was so important that the Norse made *blots* (sacrifices) to ensure that the deities stayed happy. Animals were ritually killed, and there is some evidence that the Norse people also made human sacrifices. In 1072, German monk Adam of Bremen wrote about a tradition of sacrifice at the temple to Thor, Odin, and Freyr at Uppsala in Sweden. He claimed that every nine years, nine males of every kind of living creature including humans were slaughtered in a holy grove near the temple, leaving the bodies hanging from the trees.

It was thought that such tales of human sacrifice might be Christian propaganda. However, an archaeological dig at Trelleborg, Sweden, uncovered the grim truth. In each of five wells, the skeletons of a human and animals were found together, with jewelry and tools. Four of the five human sacrifices were young children aged between four and seven.

Most sacrifices were less horrific. Rather than humans or animals, valuable jewels, tools, and weapons were cast into lakes: one hoard of such items was found in Tissø lake in Zealand, Denmark, a site sacred to the god Tyr.

The power of signs

Sigils (special symbols) had the same magic as spoken spells. They could be engraved on amulets or carved into particular woods and metals believed to have magical properties. Some sigils



◀ Thor's mighty Mjöllnir
Called Mjöllnir, Thor's hammer is depicted in this amulet with the god's staring eyes. The hammer is linked with the thunderbolt the god used to defend order. According to legend, Mjöllnir was capable of flattening mountains.



might have been representations of magical objects given to the gods such as Thor's hammer and Odin's spear. Thor's hammer, called Mjöllnir, was his main weapon, which would magically return to his hand after he hurled it at an enemy. Thunder was believed to be the sound of his hammer smashing his foes. But the hammer symbol was said to give its bearer protection and strength. It often appeared with the *sólarhvél* (sun wheel), which looks similar to the ancient sign known as the swastika and was said to bring good luck and prosperity.

Perhaps the most mysterious and powerful sign was the Helm of Awe, with its eight radiating arms like barbed tridents. It was supposed to ensure victory for the wearer and strike fear into enemies, as these lines from the Norse saga *Fáfnismál* describe: "The Helm of Awe, I wore before the sons of men, In defense of my treasure; Among all, I alone was strong, I thought to myself, For I found no power a match for my own."

▲ Magical symbol
This is part of a picture stone almost 6½ ft (2 m) tall now set into the wall of a church in Bro, Gotland, Sweden. Legend has it that a nearby well was a sacrificial site. The stone dates from the 5th century BCE and this detail looks like an elaborate sun wheel, a lucky symbol linked with Thor and representative of the earth, its relation to the sun, and to the cosmos as a whole.



▲ **Detail of the runic stone** at Rök, Östergötland, Sweden: its inscription is partially encrypted, possibly as part of a magic ritual.

The runes

The first forms of writing used by Norse and other Germanic people were angular carved marks called runes. Appearing around the 3rd century CE, runes stayed in use until the 16th or 17th century. They functioned like an alphabet, with 24 runes in the oldest form, the Elder Futhark, and 16 in the more recent Younger Futhark.

Each rune, however, was much more than just a letter; it was a symbol or pictogram. The word "rune" itself means "letter" and "mystery," and runes were a secret language of power and magic. For example, the letter that correlates to T was Tiwaz, the sky god, and looked like an arrow pointing up to the sky. The arrow was not just a pointer—Tiwaz was a war god, too, and the rune was carved to ensure victory in battle. The letter that corresponds to U was Uruz, which stands for *auroch*, the name of the now-extinct giant cattle that roamed Europe, and it represented "strength of will."

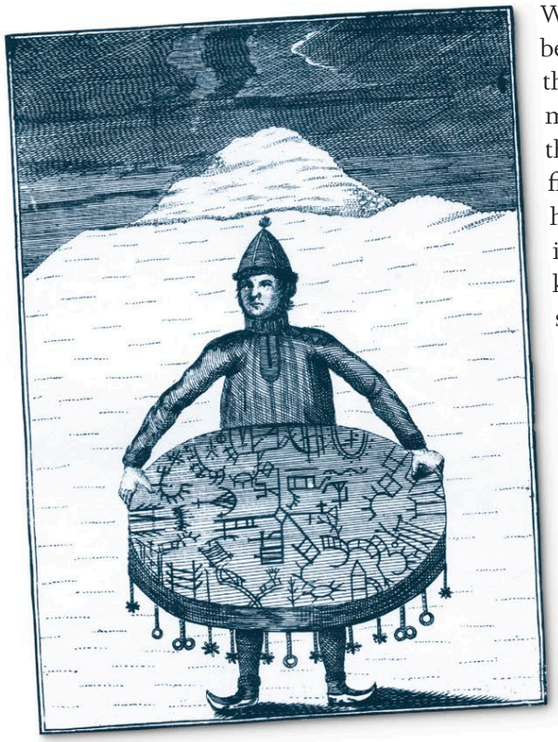
Some runic inscriptions were thought to be magic spells and were meant to be spoken with the *galdralag* (a specific poetic rhythm) to unleash their power. This spoken origin may be much older than the written form of runes. Legend has it that runes always existed and were discovered by the war god Odin as he underwent a terrible ordeal hanging from the world tree Yggdrasil. The runes were carved into the trunk by the three Norns, the female beings believed to control fate. Runes showed the Norns' power to carve out the fate of all.



▶ **The Rök Stone** in Sweden, dating from the 9th century CE, bears the longest runic inscription in the world.

DRUMMING AND TRANCE

Finnish shamanism



▲ **Connecting worlds**
To journey to the netherworld, which was ruled by Loviatar, the goddess of shamanism, a shaman would beat a drum to open the *lovi* (a term that meant both door and vagina) that led there.

What is now modern Finland has been populated for 11,000 years by the Finn and Saami people, who migrated there in pursuit of deer as the ice sheets from the last Ice Age finally receded. Both peoples were hunter-gatherers and strong believers in *hatija* (animal spirits), and both are known to have practiced shamanism since at least 10,000 years ago.

Finnish *tietäjät* and Saami *noaidi*, the shamans of their respective pagan cultures, were figures of awesome power and magical knowledge, even outside their own lands: whenever Finns appear in Norse sagas, it is a sign of the supernatural. Finland was said to be a land of wizards, witches, giants, and trolls.

Around 5,000 years ago, the Finnish and Saami cultures diverged as the Finns exchanged deer hunting for farming, but shamanism persisted in both, even after Scandinavia became Christian. Saami *noaidi* survived into the 1800s, when churches confiscated the last of their sacred drums.

Lost souls

The Finns believed in Tuonela, a netherworld located either underground or somewhere to the north, where the spirits of the dead went. A shaman was thought to be able to travel to Tuonela in a trance to meet spirits and gain wisdom from them. Shamans were sent on their spirit journey with *joiking* (haunting songs) and beating drums. But they had to trick the ferryman into taking them across the Tuonela River—and take care not to get trapped there in the body of a giant pike.

Pagan Finns believed that a person had three souls: *heinki* (life force); *luonto* (a guardian spirit); and *itse* (personality). Both *luonto* and *itse* could be separated from the body, and could therefore get lost or become stranded in the netherworld. This was thought to cause misfortune and illness. Shamans chanted spells and performed rituals that were believed to heal people or reverse bad luck by strengthening weak spirits or finding lost ones.

Both *tietäjät* and *noaidi* also helped preserve the oral Finnish and Saami cultures through storytelling. In 1835 Elias Lönnrot collected surviving *tietäjät* songs and poems in the *Kalevala*, Finland's national epic, and so created a record of magic traditions.

> "… and they draw desirable things to themselves from far off regions in a wondrous way."
>
> ON SAAMI SHAMANISM, *HISTORIA NORWEGIÆ*, c. 1500

IN CONTEXT

Bear cult

The pagan Finns revered the animals they hunted, such as elk and bear. Indeed, they held the bear so sacred that its name could not be said. The modern Finnish word for bear, *karhu*, meaning "rough fur," is one of the euphemisms they used instead. The Finns believed that the bear came from the sky and could be reincarnated. Whenever a bear was killed and eaten, they would hold the *Karhunpeijaiset* celebration to encourage the bear's soul to return. After the Finns ate bear meat, they buried the bones and set the skull under a sacred pine.



An amulet from the sacred claw of a bear was supposed to bring good luck and help the owner's spirit find its way home.

▶ Symbol of a culture
Made from reindeer skin decorated with symbols, Saami drums were beaten with a T-shaped wand of reindeer bone called a *coarve-vaever*. This drum has three main areas: the heavens (top), this world (center), and the netherworld (bottom).





▲ **Gundestrup cauldron**
This huge silver bowl dates from between 150 and 1 BCE. It was found in Denmark, but its decoration is rich in Celtic symbolism: here, the god Cernunnos, worshipped by Celts in Gaul, is shown with antlers, cross-legged, while other panels depict bulls being sacrificed. Some scholars think that the cauldron may have been used in druidic rituals.

TALES OF THE DRUIDS

Celtic myth and magic

Originally spread across Europe, Celtic people were living only in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and Brittany by the medieval period. The ancient Celts developed a rich collection of myth and magic, but as a largely oral society, it is only indirectly, through ancient Greek and Roman writings, and in tales recorded by medieval Christian scribes, that their traditions and culture have survived. There are no first-hand accounts written by the Celts themselves, so it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between their genuine beliefs and practices, what was misunderstood or added by those who recorded these, and what was part of Celtic mythology.

Druids

Historically, druids are likely to have been wise men, teachers, or priests, but they have sometimes been described as having magical powers. Their magic and beliefs are reported to have been rooted in nature, with druidic rites often held in sacred groves.

According to Roman writer Pliny the Elder, druids saw magical powers in white-juiced mistletoe, which they thought brought fertility. Pliny also claimed that druids sacrificed animals; he described the killing of two white bulls as part of a druid ceremony for gathering mistletoe. Roman writers, including Pliny and Julius Caesar, are the sources of most historical

"The druids—that is what the Celts call their magicians—hold nothing more sacred than the mistletoe."

PLINY THE ELDER, *NATURAL HISTORY*, c. 77–79 CE



▲ **The sacred berries**
This 19th-century illustration is an imagining of the ritual gathering of mistletoe. Pliny described this process: "Clad in a white robe the priest ascends the tree, and cuts the mistletoe with a golden sickle, which is received by others in a white cloak."

accounts of druids, but similar stories appear in old Welsh and Irish tales, which had Celtic origins. From the 8th century, Christian scholars recorded these stories in manuscripts such as the 12th-century *Book of Leinster* and *Book of the Dun Cow*. Druids in such myths are sometimes magicians with power over storms or other natural phenomena. In one Christian tale, when St. Patrick went to Ireland, a druid tried to discredit him by summoning a snowstorm, but Patrick dispersed it with the sign of the Cross.

Irish myths

Particularly rich in Celtic lore, Irish myths featured fantastical tales of bards, beautiful maidens, and warriors such as Cuchulainn, who had supernatural powers. They also told of the Tuatha Dé Danann, a race of magical beings said to be both ancient Irish gods and early inhabitants of Ireland. The tales were filled with magical deeds and weapons, such as the magic spear of the craftsman god Lugh, which threw itself and never missed. Many Irish myths also involved shape-shifting, reflecting the Celtic belief in the interconnectedness of all things. Hags who were offered help turned into beautiful damsels, while magicians transformed into animals such as deer and eagles, or turned foes into pigs or horses.

Among the most terrifying creatures in Celtic myth was the banshee, found in Irish, Scottish, and Norman mythology. The Irish banshee, thought to haunt the burial mounds dotted across Ireland, was described as a wild woman with streaming hair, her eyes red from weeping. She was believed to announce death with her terrible wailing.

Fairy land

In Ireland, Celtic myths fed into a strong belief in other worlds, including Tir na n'Og—the Land of Eternal Youth. Accessed through magic mounds called *sí*, this land was peopled by the *aos sí*, who were thought to be Tuatha Dé Danann, condemned to the underworld after their defeat by the Celts. The *aos sí* were said to be fiercely protective of their special land. People took care not to anger them, often referring to them as The Fair Folk or Fairies.



▶ **Ossian conjures up spirits**
This painting, inspired by Scottish poet James Macpherson's "translations" of what he said were fragments of ancient poems, shows Ossian (Oisín), a bard of Irish myth who was said to have visited Tir na n'Og.

▶ Statue power
The 11th-century Byzantine scholar John Skylitzes was perturbed by the smashing of statues in earlier centuries and described John the Grammarian, who led the destruction, as an evil sorcerer. Here, Skylitzes depicts John indulging in *stoicheiosis*—statue magic.



People climb ladders to destroy the statue

John the Grammarian conjures powers from the statue

CHRISTIANITY AND THE OCCULT

medieval Byzantine magic

After the conversion of the ruling Roman Emperor Constantine early in the 4th century, Byzantium (modern Istanbul)—the largest and richest city in Europe—became officially Christian. Most people had strong religious faith, and fervently believed in the power of Christian icons, relics, and saints to perform miracles. People are known to have chained themselves to churches in the hope of a cure for their illnesses.

Magic for ordinary people

For some time, pagan magicians lived alongside Christian clergy. The city was full of pagan statues believed to be bewitched by evil spirits, which could be manipulated, using a type of magic called *stoicheiosis*, in order to identify unfaithful husbands, pass sentences on criminals, or even clean the streets at night. The Byzantines were also firm believers in apotropaic magic—magic to ward off evil influences. They wore amulets and performed rituals to deflect the curse of the evil eye. Some people engraved stones, or wove or painted a protective image on the hems of their clothes.

Certain stones were valued for their medicinal effect, too—sardonyx (a form of onyx) was said to help prevent miscarriages, for instance.

Gradually, some churchmen took a harder line. In the 770s Emperor Leo VI issued a Novel (edict) to end tolerance of benign magic spells and amulets. A century later, the Patriarch John the Grammarian, himself accused of practicing *stoicheiosis*, led a wave of iconoclasm (the destruction of icons and statues). *Ghitevtai* (sellers of sacred objects and images to be used as amulets), and *hekantontarchos* (magicians who deceived by cunning), were increasingly driven underground.



▲ **Healing stone**
This 9th-century amulet mixes Christianity and magic. It shows a woman touched miraculously by Christ. The stone itself, hematite, was thought to protect against menstrual bleeding by absorbing the blood.

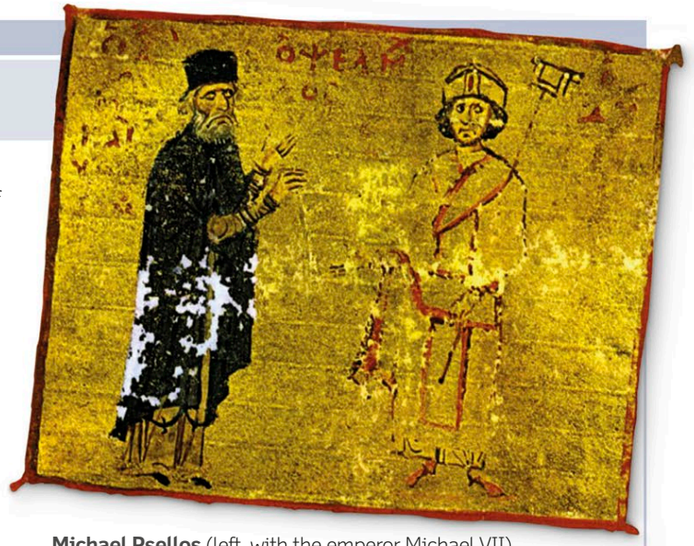
Court magic

Magic was considered acceptable and was even used by the elite at the imperial court, despite the official status of Christianity. A number of emperors and empresses were said to have

MICHAEL PSELLOS (c. 1017–1078)

Reconciler of beliefs

In medieval Byzantium, magic was a source of fascination and practical help for all levels of society, and many scholars studied the history of pagan occult practices. One of the most famous was the Greek monk Michael Psellos. Psellos (which means "stammerer") was a high-ranking political adviser and eminent historian. Despite his Christian beliefs, he had an intense academic interest in the dark arts, which he called "occult" and "forbidden." He was especially interested in astrology and the power of stones. His writings are the main source of knowledge for Byzantine magic.



Michael Psellos (left, with the emperor Michael VII) was Byzantium's great scholar of the dark arts.



▲ Astronomical table
This circle, showing the signs of the zodiac with the sun's chariot at the center, is based on 2nd-century Greek scholar Ptolemy's *Almagest*, the definitive work on astronomy for 1,300 years. His book on astrology, *Tetrabiblos*, was equally influential in Byzantium.

indulged in magical practices—although the link was sometimes made by later writers who may have wanted to discredit them.

The 11th-century Empress Zoë was reported to have murdered her husband Romanos III in order to marry her young lover Michael, and then used amulets and magic potions in a desperate attempt to get pregnant, according to the monk and scholar Michael Psellos. Patriarch John the Grammarian was said to have dabbled in the occult, while nobleman Alexios Axouch was accused of consulting a *go-es* (sorcerer). Axouch was imprisoned in a monastery for life for using potions to prevent Empress Maria of Antioch having a child, but the charges may have been concocted by his enemies.

Astrology and divination

Byzantium was home to leading astrologers, such as Hephaestion in the 6th century, but astrology held an ambiguous place in the Byzantine world. Some churchmen studied it to work out the liturgical calendar, but prognostication (the study of stars to predict the future) was considered to

"… statues that foreknow the future and predict it by lots, by prophecy, by dreams … that make people ill and cure them."

UNKNOWN AUTHOR ON *STOICHEIOSIS*, THE *ASCLEPIUS*, 3RD CENTURY CE



▲ **Divining through water**
This 10th-century glass Byzantine bowl was made for lecanomancy (the interpretation of water patterns). It is tiny—just 6½ in (17 cm) tall—perfect for concentrating the diviner's mind.

be an occult practice. Nevertheless, the court used astrologers for guidance. Famously, the 11th-century scholar Symeon Seth's reading of the stars led him to correctly predict the death of Robert of Sicily who conquered Byzantine Italy. Seth sealed these words in an envelope beforehand: "A great enemy from the West who has stirred up many things will suddenly die."

As late as the 12th century, Byzantine princess, scholar, physician, and author Anna Komnene included astrological references in her historical work the *Alexiad*, but the net was closing in. In the same century the historian Niketas Choniates condemned Emperor Manuel I for believing in reading the stars as if it was the word of God, and railed against "pestilential astrologers."

Second only to astrology was lecanomancy (dish-divining). This involved looking for patterns in a dish of water, or observing the ripples created by a stone dropped into it. The idea came from ancient Babylonia, but it was popular in Byzantium, and the Byzantine court often used a lecanomancer. There were a host of other divining methods, most taken extremely seriously. These included the art of chremetismomancy (interpreting horses' neighs); palomancy (based on inadvertent bodily twitches); and hepatoscopy (reading omens in animal livers). Strangest of all were the interpretations of *engastrimythoi* (literally, belly speakers), mediums who gave predictions in odd voices while in a state of trance and possession.

Interpreting dreams

Byzantine dream manuals were called *Oneirocritica*, after the 2nd-century book of that name by Greek scholar Artemidorus. Interpreting dreams was highly popular and mostly considered legitimate since, it was argued, the dreams were sent by God. Indeed many dream manuals were written by church patriarchs such as Nicephorus and Germanus. A 10th-century text on preparations for an imperial trip recommended packing a dream manual as standard equipment.



▶ **Imperial dream**
Basil I, one of Byzantium's greatest emperors, was born a peasant in Macedonia, but his mother dreamed that he would one day wear the crown. Her prophecy came true, as illustrated in this manuscript by 11th-century author-scholar John Skylitzes.

THE DIVINE AND THE WONDROUS

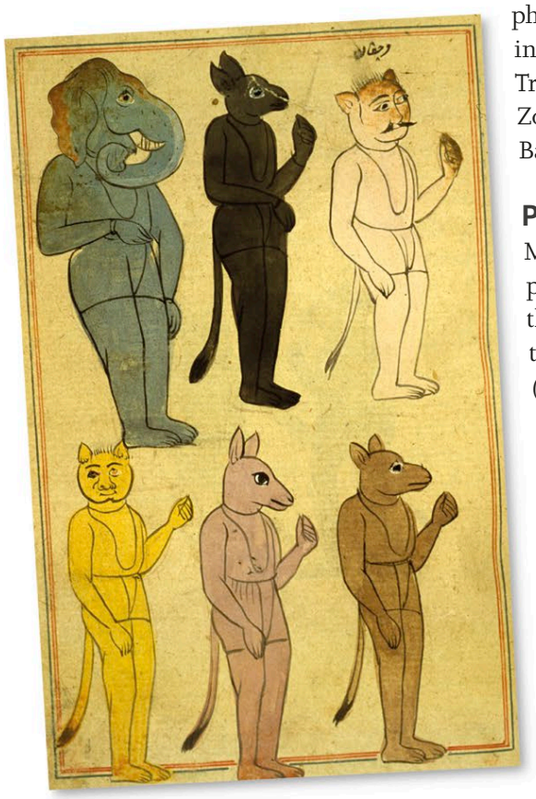
magic and early Islam

After Prophet Muhammad's death in 632, Islam spread out far from its beginnings among the Arab peoples. Wherever it spread, most people adopted Muslim beliefs, and followed the Quran. However, old customs did not instantly vanish, and while administration and scholarship became principally Islamic, ancient pre-Islamic magical practices continued across the empire.

Moreover, following Muhammad's injunction to "Seek knowledge everywhere, even if you have to go to China," Islamic society became a powerhouse of scholarship. The city of Baghdad was the center for translation of ancient works. Most texts were in Greek, but they also came from Persia, India, and China. Besides science and philosophy, works of ancient magic, including texts attributed to Hermes Trismegistus (see pp.134–135) and Zoroaster (see pp.30–31), reached Baghdad and the Islamic world.



◀ Solomonic earring
This decorative star probably alludes to the Seal of Solomon. God was said to have given Solomon the seal so he could control *jinns*.



▼ Magical spirits
Jinns (genies) were shape-shifting spirits that pre-date Islam, but the Quran accepted them as part of God's creation. Most *jinns* were neither good nor evil, but a few were *shayatin*, dangerous demons, like the blue elephant below in this copy of Zakariyaal-Qazwini's 13th-century manuscript.

Protection against demons

Muslims considered God all-powerful, but still believed that they needed his intervention to protect them from *shayatin* (dangerous ancient spirits).

The *shayatin* were a group of evil demons, including fallen angels and malicious *jinns* (genies). In the Quran they are identified as tempters of the mind, but for many people the *shayatin* were real and dangerous. The same was true of another belief that continued from early times—the evil eye: the curses and spells that made bad things happen.

Talismans and magic bowls

The Quran frowned upon the talismans of the pagan Arabs, but that did not stop early Muslims from calling upon their powers to ward off the *shayatin* and the evil eye. The concession made by followers of Islam was that talismans were inscribed with quotes from the Quran. Indeed, some might even be miniature Qurans. Solomon was known as both a prophet in the Quran and a magician of old, and his six-pointed star seal often appeared on talismans.

One particularly popular form of apotropaic (protective) magic, especially around the 12th century, was the magic bowl. Simple clay bowls were kept for healing all kinds of afflictions.

> "… it was the disbelieving devils … who taught mankind sorcery … they do no harm to anyone with their sorcery, save by God's leave."
>
> THE QURAN ON THE *SHAYATIN*



▲ Protection from demons and the evil eye
This 12th-century talisman was a scroll of sacred writing from the Quran, carried in an amulet box and worn as a pendant. The text offers protection for "the heart of the one who wears it."

Magic bowls were typically inscribed not only with quotes from the Quran, but also with magic signs from Persia or even China, alongside symbols of the zodiac and of the planets. Many had figures of beasts such as scorpions and snakes, too.

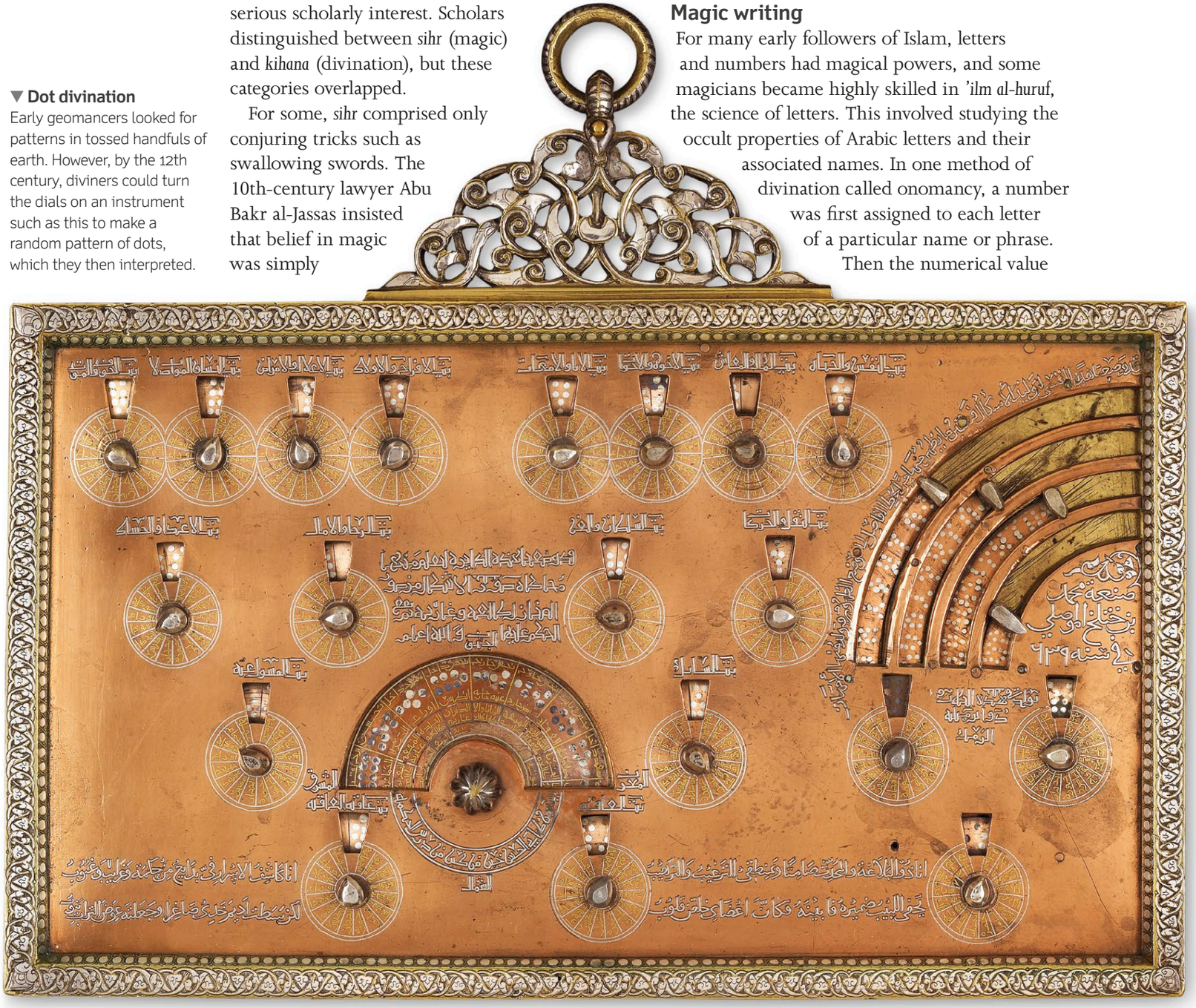
Scholars of the occult

Magic in the early Islamic world was not just workaday; the translation work spurred serious scholarly interest. Scholars distinguished between *sihr* (magic) and *kihana* (divination), but these categories overlapped.

For some, *sihr* comprised only conjuring tricks such as swallowing swords. The 10th-century lawyer Abu Bakr al-Jassas insisted that belief in magic was simply ignorance. But for many *sihr* was a true occult power able to summon *jinns* or even bring the dead back to life. The most famous scholar of magic was the 12th-century author Ahmad ibn Ali al-Buni. In *Luma'at al-nuraniyya* ("Brilliant Lights") he looked into the occult properties of the 99 names of God and advised how amulets could harness the names' supernatural power.

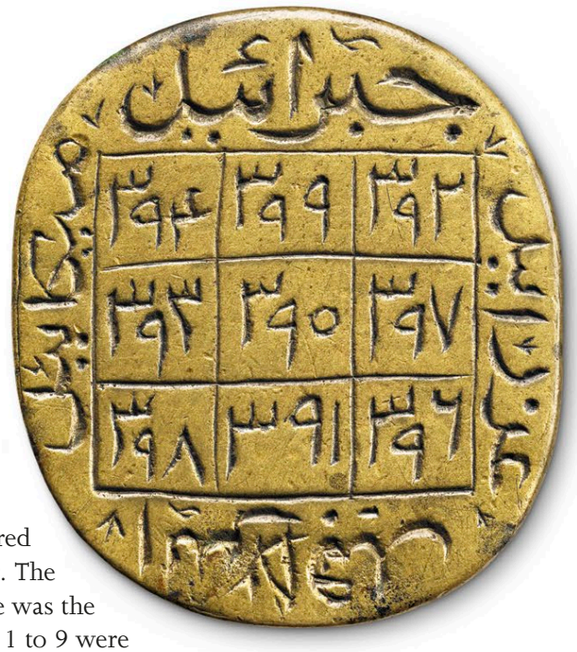
Magic writing

For many early followers of Islam, letters and numbers had magical powers, and some magicians became highly skilled in *'ilm al-huruf*, the science of letters. This involved studying the occult properties of Arabic letters and their associated names. In one method of divination called onomancy, a number was first assigned to each letter of a particular name or phrase. Then the numerical value



▼ Dot divination
Early geomancers looked for patterns in tossed handfuls of earth. However, by the 12th century, diviners could turn the dials on an instrument such as this to make a random pattern of dots, which they then interpreted.

> "It must not be imagined that the secret of the letters can be uncovered with the aid of logical reasoning; it can be reached only through vision and with the aid of divine interpretation."
>
> ATTRIBUTED TO **AHMAD IBN ALI AL-BUNI**, 12TH–13TH CENTURY



▲ **Charmed numbers**
At the heart of this oval metal seal lies *buduh*, the magic square, with its nine numbers arranged to add up to 15 in any direction. Around the outside are the names of the four archangels.

of the word or words could be found by adding up the numbers for all the letters. This was thought to unlock hidden meanings and enable predictions to be made.

The aim of calculation by nine was to predict winners and losers in a contest or battle by working out the value of each name, dividing by nine, then looking the resulting numbers up on a chart. Similar techniques were used to try to learn the outcome of an illness or journey, or the chance of an event happening. *Jafr* was another technique, which combined the letters in one of the 99 names of God with the letters of a desired objective to help make it happen.

Writing itself was thought to work powerful magic, as well as being a divination tool. Using the right letters was said to give the power to control *jinns*. There were many treatises devoted to magic alphabets, secret writing, and the letters of ancient cultures, notably the 10th-century scholar Ibn Wahshiyya's *Kitab shawq al-mustaham fi ma'rifat rumuz al-aqlan* ("The book of the frenzied devotee's desire to learn about the riddles of the ancient scripts"). Ibn Wahshiyya was one of the first historians to begin to decipher ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Magic squares

One aspect of Islamic magic that has attracted continual attention is *wafq*, the magic number square. The square may have come from China, but it was adopted in the Arab world, especially after the 12th century, and appeared in many Islamic magical manuals. The simplest and earliest magic square was the 3x3 *buduh*, in which the numerals 1 to 9 were arranged so that every row and column and both diagonals each added up to 15.

The idea still fascinates mathematicians, who have often tried to create bigger squares. But in the early Islamic world, the interest was in the squares' magical properties, and their ability to ward off afflictions. Indeed, the 3x3 magic square was considered so powerful that simply writing or uttering the name *buduh* might be enough to cure stomach pains or render its user invisible.



IN CONTEXT

Arabic alchemy

The aim of alchemy, *al-kimiya* in Arabic, was to turn one substance into another. For 9th-century scholar al-Razi, no one was a true philosopher until they had done this—it compared with the creative power of God. The ultimate quest was to turn base metal into gold, giving eternal life. Alchemists were secretive, in case their techniques fell into the hands of those seeking riches not wisdom. Often later dismissed as charlatans, alchemists laid the basis for chemistry. The greatest, Jabir ibn Hayyan (sometimes known as Geber), gave the world the laboratory, distillation, and strong acids.

An alchemical sage is pictured in a book on dreams by 10th-century alchemist al-Tamimi.

POWER OF THE PLANETS

Arabic astrology and astral magic

Astral magic (magic connected to the stars and planets) has an ancient tradition but gained its greatest foothold among the Arabic and Persian scholars of the early Islamic world. Common to all its roots was the belief that a celestial or astral plane existed in between the divine and the human planes. This was the realm of the stars and planets, and the 12 houses of the zodiac that represented the movement of the stars through the year. Astral magicians believed that every being on earth was influenced by a particular astral power, so they attempted to read the star patterns for guidance and find ways to use the influence of the stars.

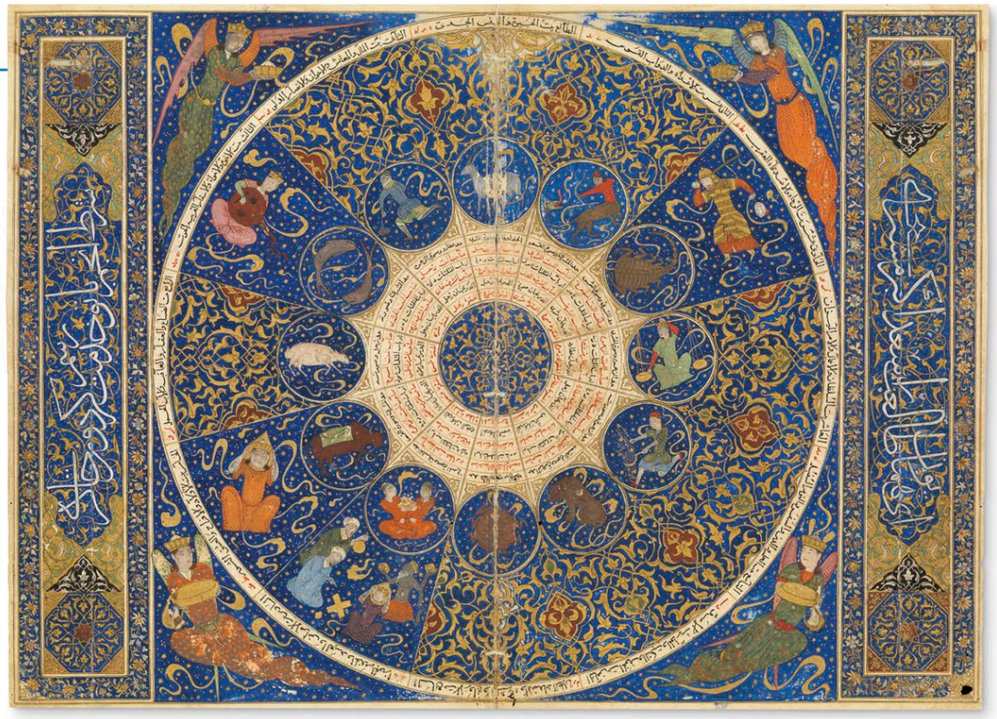
Astrology was practiced at many levels of Arabic society, from the marketplace to the court. Initially it was considered an occult practice, at odds with Islam. Meanwhile, astronomy developed in early Islam, as scholars tried to determine the direction of Mecca and the right times for prayer, and over time the study of the astral plane came to be seen as a legitimate part of natural science. Fusing astrology with science, al-Kindi's 9th-century text, *Kitab al-Shu'a'at* ("Book of the Rays"), suggested that the stars' influence came through the rays they emitted.

The *Picatrix*

The translation of Arabic texts into Latin from the 12th century onward had a huge influence on European ideas of magic and science. The most famous book on astral magic was the *Ghāyat al-Hakīm*. Probably written in the 10th or 11th century, it was translated into Latin in the 13th century and went by the name of the *Picatrix*. The *Picatrix* explained the natural links between the planets and intangibles such as colors and

◀ Astrolabe for measuring the stars

Developed by Islamic astrologers and astronomers, astrolabes were used for timekeeping; for surveying and determining the distance and height of objects; for measuring latitude; and for reading horoscopes. This one, made for Sultan Abu-l-Fatih Musa, dates from about 1240.



▶ Nativity horoscope
This horoscope of Prince Iskandar, the grandson of Tamerlane, the Mongol conqueror, shows the exact position of the stars and planets at the time of his birth on April 25, 1384.

fragrances, and offered magical recipes, including this one for brewing trouble: "Take four ounces of the blood of a black dog, two ounces each of pig blood and brains, and one ounce of donkey brains. Mix all this together until well blended. When you give this medicine to someone in food or drink, he will hate you."

Astrological predictions

A key activity for astrologers was casting horoscopes to determine the ever-changing influence of stars and planets as they shifted position. The calculations of planetary movements were often mathematically complex, so most astrologers were respected scholars. There were four categories of horoscope in early Islamic astrology: nativities (maps of the influences in play at the time of a birth); horoscopes for entire countries or dynasties; choices (to see whether it was a good time to take a particular action); and interrogations (to answer specific questions on topics as diverse as disease diagnosis and finding lost objects).

It was believed that one way to boost astrological influences was to make talismans, with different materials linked to specific astral factors. The idea was to choose the right material, usually metal, then make the talisman precisely when the right influence was calculated to be strongest.



◀ Stories in the stars
This manuscript of about 1300 is attributed to Abu Ma'schar. It contains illustrated discourses on many topics including demons, personified phases of the moon, and signs of the zodiac, such as this one on al-Saratan (Cancer).

IN CONTEXT

Modern astral magic

The *Picatrix* was widely studied in the West in the medieval era and after, including by Renaissance scholars such as Cornelius Agrippa and Marsilio Ficino and by numerous magical-mystical movements in the 19th century. In recent decades it has been read again by New Agers wishing to explore the notion of astral projection (see p.287)—the idea that it is possible to train the soul to pass into the plane of the stars and planets and their associated powers.



This modern talisman was made using the *Picatrix*'s instructions.

Protective objects

The use of protective objects, often called amulets, dates back to the very earliest years of humanity. Whether worn, carried, or placed in the home or a holy place, amulets are believed to possess the power to ward off the evil eye, negative energy, malign spirits, or even illness. Some amulets are thought to have magical power of their own, whereas others with strong religious connotations gain their perceived power through holy blessing and the wearer's faith.



▶ **Mukenga masks** are worn at funerals of high-ranking members of the Kuba people of western Africa. This mask is decorated with cowrie shells, which have been used as amulets all around the world since ancient times.



▲ **Statues of the Madonna** (mother of Christ) are thought by many Christians to have miraculous powers of protection, and believers often carry such statuettes when they travel. This one is from the Czech Republic.



▲ **Stone Venus figurines** are among the earliest portable sculptures. Made by hunter-gatherers in Europe, possibly to aid fertility, they depict women with large breasts and hips.



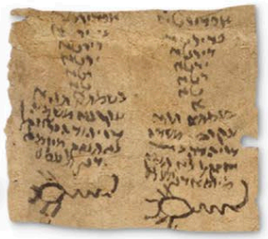
▲ **Crucifix pendants** are for many Christians more than a badge of their religion—they are believed to keep evil away. Crucifixes are also said to be the religious symbol most feared by vampires.



▲ **A rabbit's foot** is a found object thought to be charmed. Belief in its ability to transfer luck spans time and place—from Celtic Europe to African American Hoodoo followers in the US.



▲ **The frog** was a symbol of fertility because of its many offspring. Frog ornaments like this ancient Egyptian one were kept by women hoping for an easy childbirth and rebirth in the afterlife.



▲ **Scorpion papers** were a medieval Jewish magical charm. A rough sketch of a scorpion, together with a few words, could be rolled up and hung around the neck as a protective amulet.



▲ **Zuni carvings** were animal-shaped fetishes of the ancient Zuni people of New Mexico. They carried such objects for luck and to protect them from danger when they went out hunting.



▲ **Scarab beetle** amulets were laid on the heart (the only organ preserved) of a mummified dead person in ancient Egypt. The scarab was believed to ease the journey to the afterlife.



▲ **Ganesh** is the elephant-headed Hindu god of good fortune, still popular on amulets as he is believed to grant success to the wearer by removing material and spiritual obstacles.



▲ **The hagoday** (sanctuary knocker) on the door of a church guaranteed the right of asylum to anyone who knocked. Hagodays always had monstrous heads attached to heavy rings.



▲ **The eye of Horus**, also known as a *wedjat* pendant, was buried with ancient Egyptian pharaohs to protect them in the afterlife. Now such eyes are often known as *nazars*, from the Arabic word for sight or surveillance.



▲ **The hamsa** (also called the Hand of Fatima) warded off the evil eye and may have originated in ancient Egypt or in Carthage, where it was associated with the chief goddess, Tanit.



▶ **Christian relics** were the physical remains of saints, kept in a container. They were venerated objects, and early Christians would travel far to see them. Many were supposed to have miraculous healing powers. This object stood on a church altar while a mass was said in an attempt to stave off the plague.



◀ Words at its heart
This page from the Duke of Sussex's German Pentateuch (c. 1300) shows the decorated first word (which means "He spoke") of *Bemidbar* (the Book of Numbers), surrounded by knights and monsters. The central placement and rich decoration reflect the importance of words.

I CREATE AS I SPEAK

Jewish magic and mysticism

While much magic was condemned in the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), it was practiced during the medieval period by people at all levels of Jewish society, including rabbis. Even certain stories in the Tanakh depict leaders performing acts of magic: for instance, in the story of Moses, Aaron casts down his rod before the Pharaoh and it magically transforms into a snake (see p.28). The Babylonian Talmud, a sacred Jewish text, also contains references to magic in the form of spells, incantations, and the use of amulets.

The language of enchantment

Words were a key part of medieval Jewish magic. According to Jewish tradition, the Hebrew language has a divine origin and its letters have creative power. In the Tanakh, for example, God brings the world into existence simply by pronouncing words. Some Jewish people believed that the right combination of words and letters could work magic and be used for anything from defeating demons to making prophecies. The letters of the names of God and the angels were considered especially potent. Some spells actively built on religious wording: in one text, magic words were added to a daily prayer to make a series of spells with specific aims, such as the raising of the dead. The strong relationship between magical and religious words persisted for centuries, particularly in the Jewish mystical tradition known as Kabbalah (see pp.88–89, 136–139).

Jewish scholars of magic were much influenced by the study of ancient Aramaic—the day-to-day language of Israel in the Second Temple Period (539 BCE–70 CE) and the language of the Talmud. Some argue that the most famous magic word of all, "Abracadabra!," even comes from the Aramaic *avra k'davra* meaning "I create as I speak."



▲ The magic star
The star-shaped Seal of Solomon and the six-pointed Star of David, shown here on the St. Petersburg Codex (the oldest known complete text of the Tanakh, c. 1010), were often viewed as powerful magical symbols.

Books of magic

Many Jewish women were well versed in the magic used for dealing with everyday issues such as illness or infertility. In contrast, rabbis and other scholars—typically men—practiced learned magic, which during the medieval period was increasingly written down in books of magic. Books such as the *Sepher ha-Yashar* ("Book of the Upright"), *Raza Rabba* ("The Great Secret"), and *Sepher ha-Razim* ("Book of Secrets") gave recipes for acts such as healing, stimulating love, bringing luck, causing pain, and banishing demons.

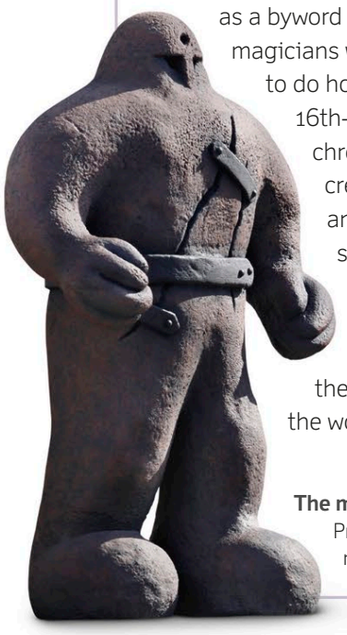
Talismans and amulets

Many Jewish people in the medieval period believed in *shedim*, evil spirits that brought suffering; a key figure of fear was the night demon Lilith, who preyed upon children and women in childbirth.

IN CONTEXT

Living clay

Golems were sad creatures that were believed to be magically brought to life from clay by chanting the names of God. However, because they were not created by God they had no power to speak, and even today "golem" is sometimes used as a byword for "stupid." While some magicians were said to create golems to do household chores, a famous 16th-century legend from Prague chronicles how a golem was created by the Maharal to stop anti-Semitic attacks. Golems supposedly had the word *emet* (truth) inscribed on their foreheads, and could be reduced to dust by removing the first letter, which changed the word to *met* (death).



The mythical golem of 16th-century Prague has been recreated in this modern-day statue.



▲ **Protective words**
Medieval amulets, such as this one, had magic words inscribed on their metal plates. They were hung around the neck to ward off evil spirits, or bring good fortune to the wearer.

Kame'a (amulets) were commonly worn as protection against such spirits. Foxtails and crimson threads were popular amulets, while an *even tekumah* (preserving stone) was carried to prevent miscarriage.

Amulets were often written on, so that they contained what were considered the most powerful elements of Jewish magic—words. Some were religious texts, such as copies of Psalm 126, which were placed about the house to protect children. Others included the names of angels, or traditional magical phrases etched on a metal plate and hung around the neck. Pieces of furniture or household items were sometimes given protective inscriptions, too.

One especially powerful talisman was the Seal of Solomon, the star-shaped symbol that medieval writers claimed was engraved on Solomon's signet ring by God. The seal reportedly gave Solomon the power to control *shedim*. The star could have either five or six points, and the way the triangles interlaced was said to make demons dizzy.

Kabbalah

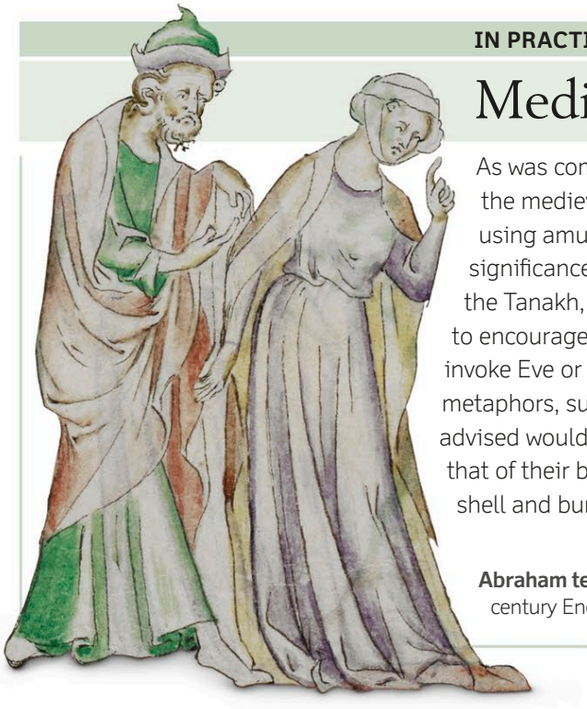
The word "kabbalistic" is often used today to mean secretive or mysterious, but the root of the word—Kabbalah—is a Jewish mystical way of thinking that aims to understand, connect with, and even influence the divine. Kabbalah emerged in 1230 with a book called the *Zohar*. The Spanish rabbi who discovered this text claimed that it was the 1,000-year-old teachings of a 2nd-century sage. The *Zohar* was thought to reveal hidden meanings—aspects of the divine—in the Torah (the first five books of the Tanakh), and studying these meanings carefully was believed to enable the reader to achieve a mystical union with God.

The academic, theological side of Kabbalah was hugely important in Jewish thinking during the centuries that followed. However, there was another side, known as "practical Kabbalah," which aimed to influence the world, rather than simply come closer to the divine. From the 14th century onward, practical Kabbalah followers put into practice the idea of using the names of God and the angels to make amulets or to form part of their incantations. They incorporated other Jewish occult traditions, too, including oneiromancy (dream divination) and ideas about demons: for example, the 15th-century kabbalistic book *Sepher ha-Mashiv* ("Book of God's Wind") described how to use incantations to summon demons, angels, and even God.

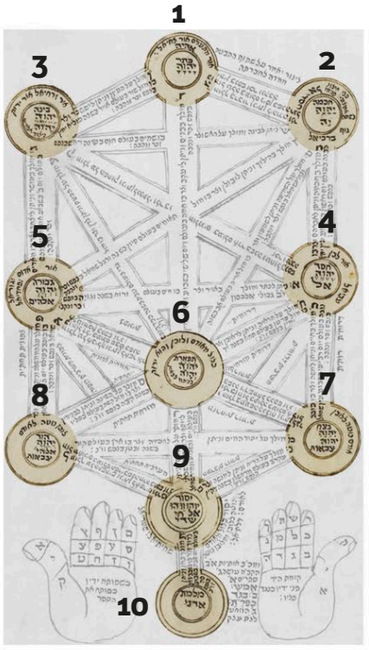
IN PRACTICE

Medieval Jewish love spells

As was common practice in many cultures, Jewish people in the medieval period often turned to magic to help with love, using amulets, rituals, and magic words, which carried great significance. An amulet's inscription might invoke lovers from the Tanakh, such as Abraham and Sarah or Isaac and Rebecca, to encourage love. Conversely, to end love the inscription might invoke Eve or Amnon, who raped his half-sister Tamar. Some used metaphors, such as words for burning, to stimulate desire. One spell advised would-be lovers to fill an eggshell with their own blood and that of their beloved, and then to write both names in blood on the shell and bury it—instant results were promised.



Abraham tells Sarah that God has promised them a child in this 14th-century English manuscript; the couple were often alluded to in love spells.



KEY

1 *Kether* (Crown)

2 *Hokhmah* (Wisdom)

3 *Binah* (Understanding)

4 *Hesed* (Kindness)

5 *Gevurah* (Might)

6 *Tifereth* (Glory

7 *Netsakh* (Victory)

8 *Hod* (Splendor)

9 *Yesod* (Foundation)

10 *Malkuth* (Sovereignty), sometimes also known as *Shekhinah* (the Divine Presence)

◀ Tree of life
This is a 15th-century *ilan* (often called a tree of life): a diagram showing the mystic connections between ten *sephiroth* (nodes), which represent various aspects of God. Scholars of Kabbalah reflected on such diagrams in order to pursue a spiritual union with God, which some believed could help them influence the material world.

ANGELIC ALPHABETS

the spread of *charaktêres*



▲ Magical scholarship
Like other medieval Jewish kabbalistic texts, the 13th-century *Sefer Raziel haMal'akh* ("The Book of Raziel the Angel") contains magical symbols and other mystical knowledge, including the *Karaqtiraya* and star-shaped Seals of Solomon shown here.

Writing was at the heart of medieval Jewish magic, whether in the form of spells, curses, or protective words on amulets. Signs and symbols were a central part of written magic, maintaining secrecy and, it was believed, capturing the essence of ancient magic.

Some signs and symbols were developed by Jewish magicians themselves, but most derived from other cultures. The best-known import is *Karaqtiraya* (the Hebrew transliteration of *charaktêres*—an ancient Greek word for letter-like signs usually formed from lines tipped with tiny circles). These were believed to have intrinsic mystical power. *Karaqtiraya* often appear in medieval kabbalistic texts, but their origins predate the 13th-century rise of Kabbalah by at least 700 years.

Karaqtiraya are thought to have entered the Jewish magical tradition around 1,500 years ago. No one is certain where they came from. Some speculate that they derived from Egyptian hieroglyphs, and others from Mesopotamian cuneiform, but the most likely source is ancient Greek magical texts. Some of the signs resemble those found on Greek Magical Papyri and gems (see pp.32–35), while others appear to be letters of the Greek and Hebrew alphabets with circles added to their tips.

Because it was thought to be vital to copy magical writing accurately, these signs were preserved over the centuries—they endured in a way that ever-changing ordinary language did not. However, by the medieval period the story of their origins had been lost. *Karaqtiraya* are so similar to letters that Jewish scholars who studied them tried to decode them as parts of an alphabet, giving them Hebrew equivalents. Throughout the medieval period such scholars developed *Karaqtiraya* into a variety of alphabets, each associated with a specific angel, such as Metatron, Gabriel, or Raphael.

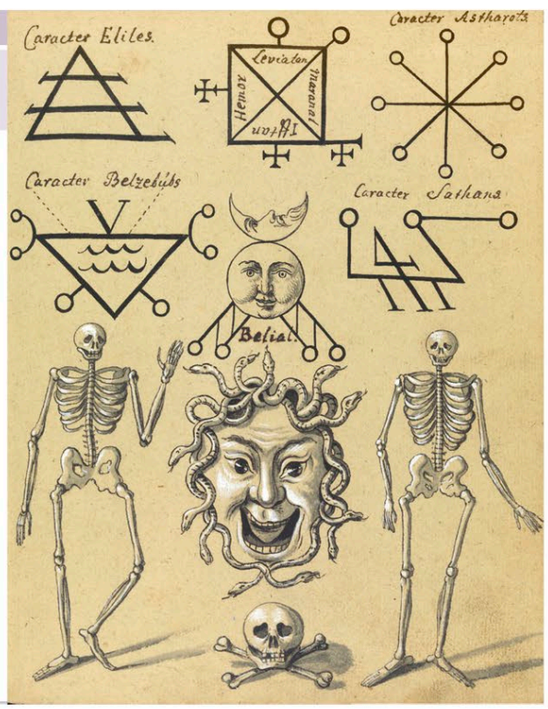
Secret codes

Jewish people were not alone in absorbing magical signs and alphabets, and *charaktêres* also entered the Christian and Muslim worlds. Leading church thinkers Augustine and Caesarius

IN CONTEXT

Symbols and seals

Arabic, Jewish, and Christian traditions cross-fertilized in the medieval era, and *charaktêres* appeared in all three. Their influence can also be seen in later occult symbols, which often combined elements from several traditions. The 18th-century demonology compendium pictured (right) draws on an eclectic mix of sources, and includes several magical seals. Each carries a label associating it with a particular demon, drawing on the medieval Arabic tradition that demons could be controlled or vanquished with written seals. The seals shown here are labeled as "Caracters," and—although they are named for demons rather than angels—some of their shapes clearly show the influence of *charaktêres*.



This compendium, which claims to summarize "the entire Magical Art," includes seals for demons such as Beelzebub.



▲ **Crossing cultures**
Magic signs and symbols were borrowed and re-borrowed across cultures, as this 10th- or 11th-century Byzantine amulet shows, with its *charaktêres*, Seal of Solomon, and ancient Greek text.

of Arles in the 5th and 6th centuries CE both condemned *charaktêres* as demonic, but such views did not stop people from inscribing them on amulets, or passing them on in magical texts. *Charaktêres* also appeared alongside Christian words and symbols in amulets from, for example, medieval Byzantium. In early medieval Arabic texts, they were linked to constellations.

Angelic alphabets survived long beyond the medieval period, and Jewish *Karaqtiraya* were studied by the famous 16th-century German occultist Cornelius Agrippa. Agrippa later disclaimed his works on magic as youthful folly, but various angelic alphabets are attributed to him, including the so-called celestial alphabet; the Malachim (from the Hebrew word *mal'akh* for "angels" or "messengers"); and the Transitus Fluvii (from the Latin for "crossing the river"). All three appear to have been influenced by *Karaqtiraya*. Also in the 16th century, the English alchemist John Dee along with his associate Edward Kelley created a celestial alphabet, which they claimed was revealed to them by angelic spirits that appeared in visions.

EUROPEAN FOLK MAGIC

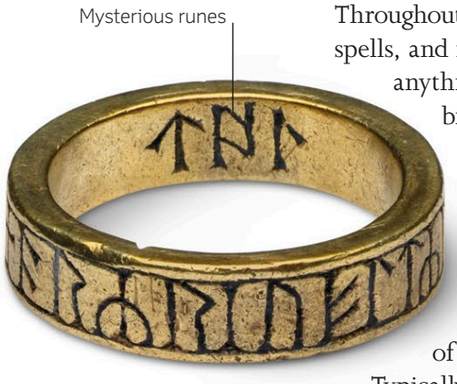
the common magical tradition

From the 5th century onward, Christianity spread across Europe, and pagan religions were driven into the shadows. The early Church associated magic with paganism and demons, yet a common tradition of magic survived, and even thrived, in Europe throughout the medieval period. This tradition was made up of a variety of practices, often with complex relationships to Christianity, that were carried out by a wide range of people, including physicians and even churchmen. Unlike the elite magic studied by scholars, common magical practices were also accessible to ordinary folk, for whom they offered solutions to everyday troubles, such as relationship problems, sickness, and crop failure.

Magic of words

Throughout the medieval period, magic words, spells, and incantations were called upon to do anything from ensuring a safe journey to bringing sickness or death upon a person. Mostly, words were thought to have more power when they were spoken out loud rather than written down. People might have worn amulets with magic words written on them, but primarily as a reminder of the words of power that were to be spoken.

Typically, spells were in meter and rhyme—making them easy to chant, like poetry. Many Anglo-Saxon charms were recorded in medical books, because they were considered a legitimate way of dealing with an ailment. But people might as readily have been given a charm to prevent theft or crop failure as to stop a nosebleed. One famous Anglo-Saxon charm, the *Wið fœrstice*, was used to stop



▲ Runic protection
The Bramham Moor Ring was found in Yorkshire and dates from the 9th century. No one has been able to decipher the runes inscribed on it, but they are thought to be magical.



▶ Extracting the swallow stone
This illustration from the *Anatomie of Melancholy* by Robert Burton shows someone removing a chelidonius (a stone inside a swallow, believed to have magical properties). The stone was wrapped in linen cloth and tied around the neck to cure fever or ward off evil.



a sharp pain. The words of the charm imply that the pain comes from a woman's spear, or the invisible arrows of elves (elf-shot).

Power of objects

In common magic, seemingly mundane objects, such as stones, plants, and animals, were believed to possess power. Scholarly and religious traditions found in, for example, lapidaries (books listing the virtues of stones for magic and medicine) and bestiaries (collections of moralizing stories about animals) had also entered oral culture.

Certain plants, too, were considered to have natural powers. They were used to make magic potions or amulets, or were thought to have magical effects if gathered at certain times while saying specific words, or if placed in a particular location. For example, mugwort gathered before sunrise and placed in a person's shoe was supposed to prevent tiredness. Some magic objects were stranger. One cure for toothache, for instance, involved wearing the tooth from a dead man's skull around the neck. Rings imbued with celestial powers might be used to protect the wearer from demons or some illnesses.

Predictions

To see what the future held, people consulted men and women skilled in the arts of divination. Divining meant looking for signs and patterns in nature, for example, the way animals behaved or the flight of birds (augury), or by casting stones or bones (cleromancy). For the experts (often early cunning folk; see p.124), these were advanced arts, requiring years of study. Ordinary people often used more basic methods, such as predicting the weather using the old lore, "Red sky in the morning, shepherd's warning."



▲ The Middleham jewel
Wealthy, educated people, such as the owner of this 15th-century gold amulet, also made use of stones and charms. This amulet mixes biblical scenes and words from the Mass with magical elements, such as the word "Ananizapta," believed to be a charm against epilepsy. The blue sapphire was said to cure ailments including ulcers and headaches.

"This potent amulet, of old renowned, Wear like a bracelet on thy left arm bound."

MARBOD OF RENNES, *DE LAPIDIBUS*, 11TH CENTURY



▲ **Lord of the forests**
This 8th-century Slavic brooch shows Veles, the god of magic and music, with a human face and horns. He is thought to be one of the origins of the name of the *volkhvy*, the Slavic pagan priesthood.

There were countless methods of fortune-telling, such as chiromancy (palm-reading), oneiromancy (dream interpretation), and numerology. Astrology, too, flourished. Most astrology was practiced only by the wealthy and educated as it required specialist knowledge and detailed observations of the stars and planets. The popular astrology used by ordinary folk relied on more accessible celestial signs, usually the phases of the moon, to predict the best days to carry out specific activities.

Slavic magic

In the Slavic world, belief in magic was rooted in paganism and persisted well into the late medieval period. Many Slavs resisted Christianization until it was forced upon them by the Northern Crusades (the 12th-century Catholic wars against the people of the Baltic). The Slavs venerated one supreme god, but they believed in an array of lesser deities, too. Their world was also peopled with magical spirits including those of water (such as *mavka* and *rusalka*), forest (*lisovyk* and *leshy*), and field (*polyovyk*). Spirits of the home (*domovyk*) and ancestors were held in particular regard as they were believed to help predict the future and to offer protection.

Slavic witches

Witches, shamans, and wise women played an especially prominent role in Slavic magic, and offered divination, protection against bad spirits, and healing spells. The Slavic priesthood, which admitted both men and women, was called the *volkhvy*, from *volk*, the Ukrainian word for wolf, as well as the name of the Russian god of magic, music, and the watery underworld.

In Russia, *volkhvy* were thought to have descended from wizards and witches who could shape-shift into wolves and bears, while witches of the Balkans, especially Serbia, Macedonia, and Bulgaria, were believed to have dragon ancestors. Descendants of the *volkhvy*, and therefore carriers of witchblood, are rumored to survive in modern-day Ukraine.

The witch also featured in mythical Slavic magic, none more so than the extraordinary figure of Baba Yaga, who was portrayed as a ferocious, wild old woman with terrifying magic powers—sometimes vicious, and sometimes kind. She still appears in many Russian fairy tales, in which she flies around in a mortar, wields a pestle, and lives deep in the forest in a hut usually described as standing on chicken legs—and sometimes she even has chicken legs herself.



▶ **Good and evil witch**
Rather than riding on a broomstick, Baba Yaga of Russian folklore sits in a mortar and uses the pestle as an oar—here, to chase a girl. Baba Yaga is an ambiguous figure, both fairy godmother and evil witch.



▲ **Animal magic**
Many animals had magical associations; the stag, for example, often represented speed, strength, or virility in spells. One 14th-century manuscript advised the use of a stag's testicles as an aphrodisiac.

"Oleg made inquiry of the wonder-working magicians as to the ultimate cause of his death."

RUSSIAN PRIMARY CHRONICLE ON *VOLKHVY*, c. 1113

SYMPATHY, SAINTS, HERBS, AND HUMORS

magic and medicine

Medieval medicine was a diverse field, in which magic vied with science as physicians developed more sophisticated surgical procedures and used a wider range of herbal remedies. As knowledge of medicine grew and methods became more professional, practices previously relegated to quacks and local healers became more respectable.

Christian writers, such as St. Augustine in the 4th–5th centuries, had long viewed disease as a divine punishment for sin, which, equally, was subject to God's grace in its cure. Augustine condemned medical divination and practices such as hanging curative amulets on patients to signify demonic possession.



▼ **Medical divination**
Here, the caladrius bird, a fabled snow-white waterfowl that frequented royal courts, is used for divination—if it looked away from a patient, he would die; if it stared in his direction, the sick person would recover and the bird would fly away, miraculously carrying off the illness.



◀ **Showing the way**
A pharmacist gathers herbs in this illustration from the *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, an 11th-century herbal and manual for healthy living. Herbs played a key role in popular medicine, and as their use had a clear physical effect, it met the clergy's general approval.

Professional doctors

From the 9th century onward, Arabic medical texts, which incorporated the work of ancient Greek and Roman physicians, became available in translation in Western Europe. Among these was the work of Greek medical pioneer Hippocrates, who had developed a theory of the four humors around 400 BCE. According to his theory, imbalances in the body in the levels of blood, phlegm, and black and yellow bile caused disease, and restoring their equilibrium would cure the illness.

Hippocrates' theory laid the basis for formal medieval training, and around 1075 a medical school was founded at Salerno in southern Italy. The process of forming a trained workforce began. These new doctors became protective of their authority and status and sought to squeeze out traditional practitioners: as early as 1140 King Roger of Sicily required healers and physicians to have an official license. However, it was only the rich who could afford to consult licensed doctors. Despite advances in education, popular medicine and the belief in its magical properties were deep-rooted and hard to stamp out.

Saintly cures

As well as science or magic, people sometimes looked to religious methods to prevent or cure illness. In the 8th–9th centuries, the Frankish king Charlemagne himself was said to own a relic made up of two crystal hemispheres containing portions of the True Cross and the hair of the Virgin Mary for protection from disease and danger. Christian beliefs also fed into explanations of how particular methods worked; in the mid-12th century, for example, the abbess Hildegard of Bingen wrote that the Devil hated gemstones—widely believed to have curative properties—because they reminded him of the City of God. In such an environment, where believers from all levels of society routinely prayed to saints for cures—for example, to Apollonia, whose jaw, the story went, had been broken by her Roman tormentors, and who became the patron saint of toothache sufferers—there was a fine line between acceptable Christian practices and medical magic.

Folk medicine

The poor had no recourse to trained doctors. Instead, they depended on folk healers, who offered herbal cures for a range of ills from childbirth pains to boils and toothache.

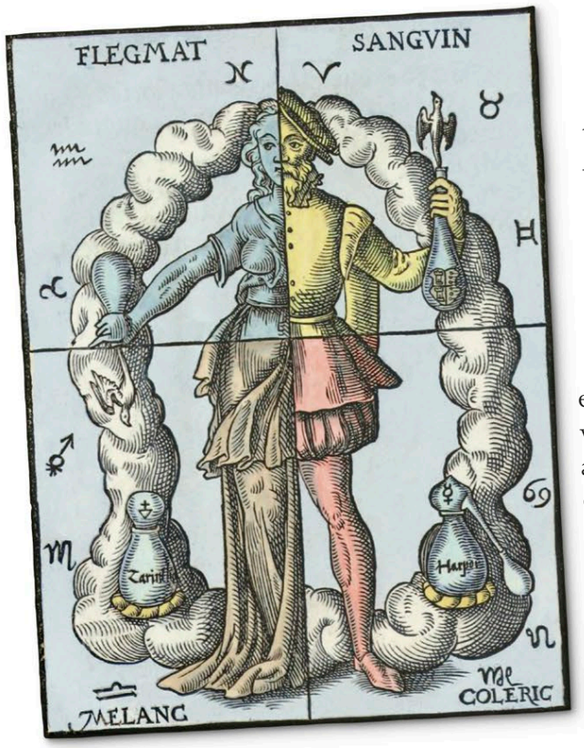
Folk medical practices included the use of sympathetic magic, which meant that the healer found something similar to the ailment in nature and attempted to banish the disease with it. For

▼ **Curing sore eyes**
This page from an 11th-century English herbal shows the entries for Hart's clover and chamomile. The text recommends making them into a paste and smearing it on the eyelids as a remedy for sore eyes.



> "What about those … who sing charms over the sick, children, and animals? Surely they do not sin mortally?"

WILLIAM OF RENNES, *APPARATUS AD SUMMAM RAYMUNDI*, c. 1241



▲ Humors of the body
Much professional medicine tried to restore a balance between the humors, shown here clockwise from top left: phlegm, blood, yellow bile, and black bile. This medical practice was a far cry from rural healing methods and charms.

> "Neither the first day of May nor the last day of September or April should blood be drawn, or goose be eaten."
>
> *REGIMEN SANITATIS SALERNITANUM*, C. 12–13TH CENTURIES

example, one cure for patients with jaundice was to make a potion from mashed earthworms and stale urine in the belief that the yellow color of the ingredients would act against the yellow tint the disease gave to the sufferer's skin.

According to folk healers—a world away from medical professionals—five nettle leaves provided courage, and mistletoe prevented a man from being condemned in court. The *Leechbook* of Bald, an 11th-century English medical text, describes a cure for dysentery that involved digging up a bramble root while singing the Lord's Prayer nine times, adding mugwort to the root, and boiling the plants in milk until the mixture turned red. Meanwhile, *Lacnunga* ("Remedies"), a similar compilation, blamed many afflictions on the mischievous workings of elves.

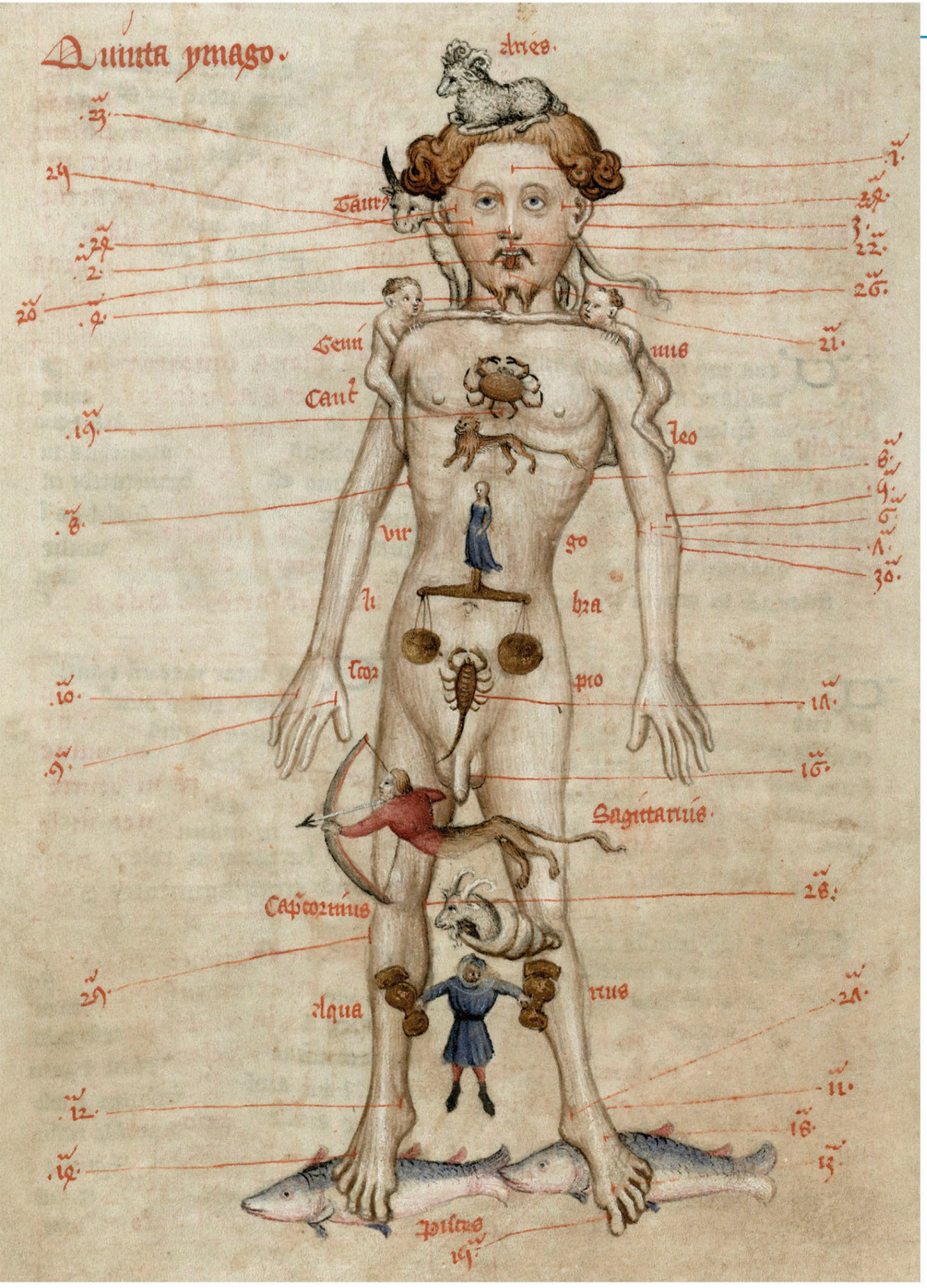
Amulets and charms continued to be widely used. While the 13th-century theologian St. Thomas Aquinas condemned these in his *Summa Theologica*, stating that scrolls contained within amulets or the writing engraved on talismans might be the names of demons, others were more accepting. Even some university doctors thought such methods could be effective: around 1300, Arnold of Villanova claimed to have used an astrological talisman to cure Pope Boniface VIII of kidney stones.

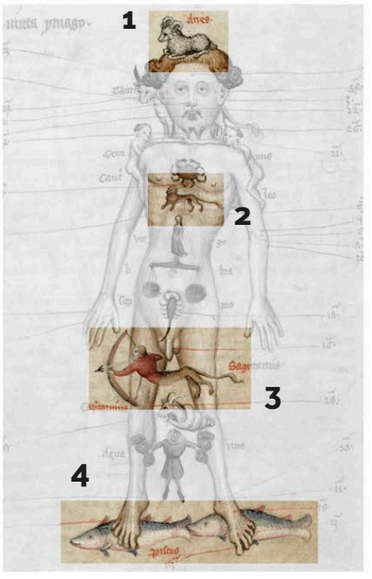
Medical astrology

It was common for medieval medicine to involve astrology; physicians and even churchmen accepted that heavenly bodies could exert influence on the earth. Indeed, by the end of the 13th century university-trained physicians were required to have studied medical astrology. When the French king Philip VI convened the physicians of Paris in 1348 to provide an explanation for the Black Death, their report concluded that a conjunction of three planets in the sign of Aquarius three years earlier had caused the plague. Physicians routinely consulted horoscopes to find the auspicious days for surgery or courses of treatment, so much so that in 1437 a bitter controversy broke out in the University of Paris over the most propitious time for taking laxatives in January.

▼ Exorcizing illness
Here, St. Francis of Assisi cures a woman by casting out the demon thought to cause her sickness. Alongside professional medicine, exorcisms, prayers, and invocations to saints were believed to have the power to cure disease.







KEY

1 Aries presided over the head and eyes.

2 Leo controlled the heart, spine, and upper back.

3 Sagittarius governed the hips, lower back, pelvis, and thighs, as well as the liver and sciatic nerve.

4 Pisces, represented by fish, ruled the feet.

◀ **Signs of the zodiac**
Zodiac diagrams were a common feature of medieval medical works, such as this one from John Foxton's 1408 *Liber Cosmographiae*. It shows the parts of the body believed to be influenced by each sign of the zodiac, such as the head, ruled by Aries, which was signified by a ram.



▲ **In *Mandrake***, from a 14th-century Italian manuscript, the dog is tied to the root while the man moves out of earshot.



The mandrake legend

No other plant has such a reputation for magical, even demonic, powers as the mandrake. Its long root contains tropane alkaloid chemicals that can cause dizziness, a raised heart rate, and hallucinations. Witches were said to add it to potions in the hope that it would send them into a trancelike state or help them fly. More prosaically, the ancient Roman scholar Pliny told patients to chew it before surgery to dull pain, and in the medieval period it was highly valued as a medicinal herb.

However, mandrake owes much of its magical status to its oddly humanlike shape. The ancient Greek idea that plants could affect the body parts that they resembled persisted in the medieval period. The mandrake's shape was associated with both the male and the female body, so it was sought-after as an aphrodisiac and a cure for sterility. As well as fortune in love, people wore amulets made from its root to bring more general good luck.

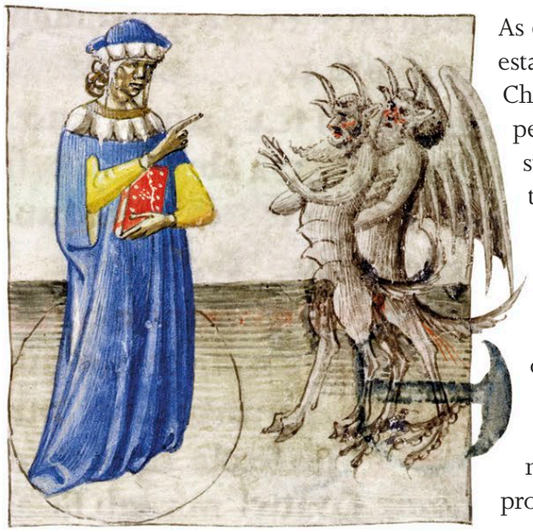
The most famous legend linked to mandrake was that when pulled up, the root would utter a scream so terrible that it would kill anyone who heard it. Those in need of mandrake were advised to tie the root to a dog, so that it would pull up the plant and suffer the fatal curse. Here, the dog is lured by a bowl of food. Later legends held that mandrake would grow where a criminal was hanged or buried, nourished by the person's semen and urine, such tales earning it the nickname "little gallows man."

"Would curses kill as doth the mandrake's groan …"

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *HENRY VI*, 1589–1592

DIVINE POWER AND EVIL SPIRITS

magic and medieval Christianity



▲ **Devil's advocate**
Zoroaster (also called Zarathustra) was an ancient Persian spiritual leader described by Roman author Pliny the Elder as the inventor of magic. The Christian church took a dim view of such an accolade. In this miniature from 1425 he is depicted with two demons.

As churchmen worked to establish the influence of Christianity in the medieval period, they tried to show the superiority of divine power to that of evil spirits. Clergy sometimes recognized people's yearning for supernatural help, and offered them saints, miracles, and prayers in place of shamans, magic, and spells. Saints, in particular, were placed in counterpoint to magicians as guardians and protectors of humanity.

Devilish practice

Magic was mostly viewed as a threat to Christianity. The clergy saw it as evil, and they tried to stamp it out. Practitioners of magic began to be demonized as purveyors of *sortilegium* (sorcery) or *maleficium* (evil practice). Those accused were often the poor and vulnerable, and they were said to distort Christian rites to do the Devil's work.

Charlemagne's General Admonition of 789 CE required magicians and enchanters to repent or face death. But clearly it was not very effective: in 829 the Council of Paris described the existence of conjurors who could play tricks on the mind, and *malefici* (evil-doers) who could call down storms and hail and predict the future. Ironically, much of what is now known about early medieval magic comes from the writings of those Church scholars who tried to define this threat, such as the 6th-century *Etymology* by Isidore of Seville.

The power of relics

As time went on, people began to believe that Christian symbols had their own apotropaic powers (able to avert evil influences or bad luck). People started wearing Christian images such as crosses to ward off evils, particularly sickness and poverty, just as they had previously relied on amulets with pagan symbols.

The cult of relics offered yet more protection. In the 11th and 12th centuries, pilgrims went out of their way to visit a holy relic, whether a saint's finger, a fragment of the True Cross, or cloth worn

SAINT AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO (353–430 CE)

Condemning magic

Augustine lived in Hippo Regius in what is now Algeria, and was one of the early Christian church's most influential thinkers. Not everyone agreed with his ideas, which he expressed in such books as *City of God*, but they dominated Christian views for over a thousand years. Augustine was determined to separate Christianity from paganism so he took a hard line on magic, which he argued was taught by the Devil and acted out by demons. To perform magic, he declared, was to make a pact with the Devil—an assertion which, much later, was used to condemn witches.



by the Virgin Mary. Such relics were deemed to have miraculous powers, and there was a black market for fake relics. Some advocates of the Church condemned relic worship, while others such as Thomas Aquinas held quite the opposite view—that honoring relics was honoring God.

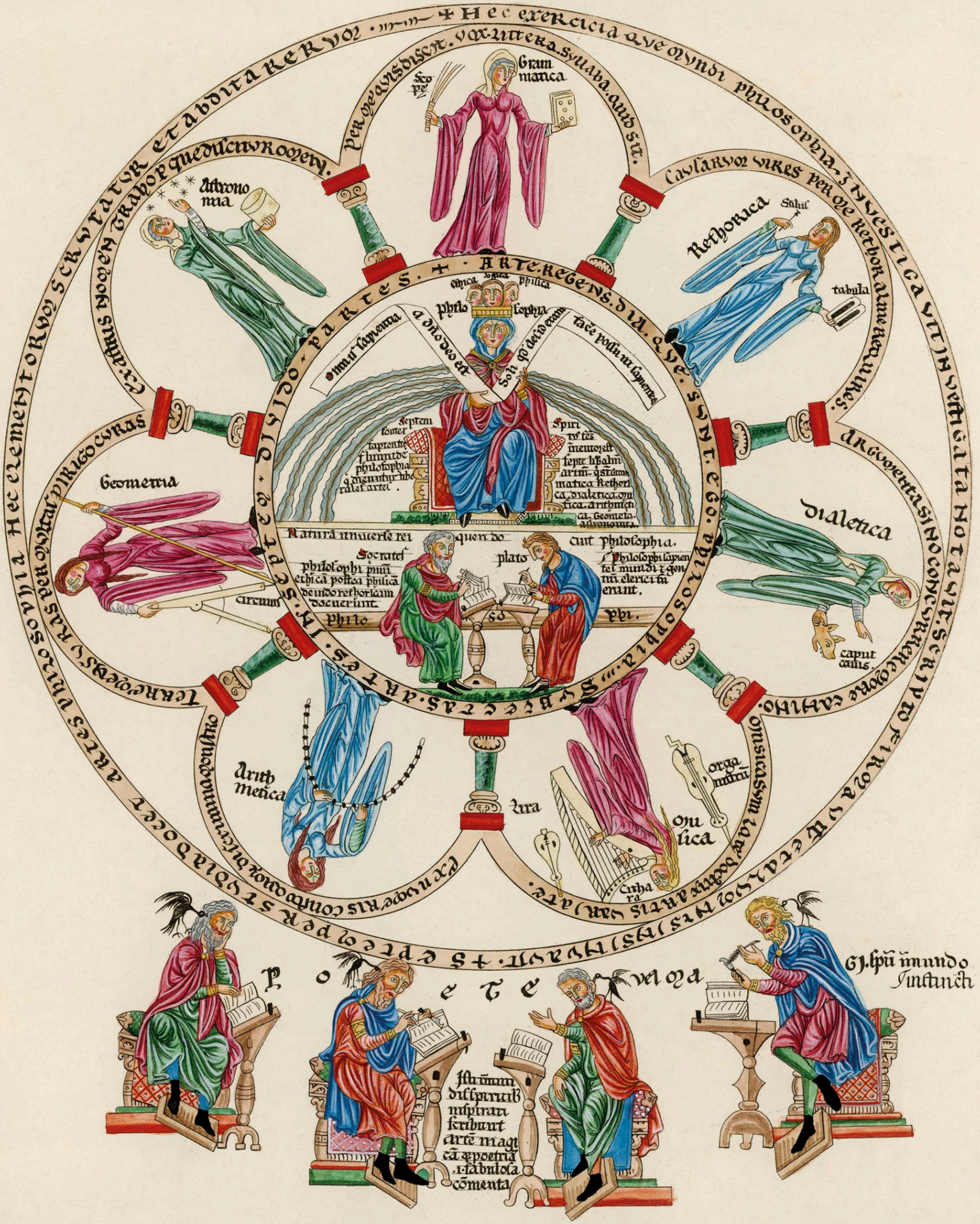
Angel magic

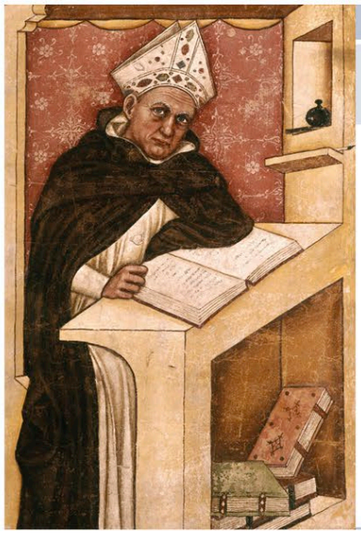
Belief in the power of guardian angels sparked a similar debate about good and evil practices. Angel magic involved rituals such as prayer, fasting, or meditation on images, to purify the soul in order to establish a channel of communication with angels. Some theologians argued that praying to angels for help was no different from summoning pagan spirits. Others gave angel magic the respectable title of theurgy. The popular 12th-century texts *Ars notoria* were guides to angel magic believed to be based on ancient texts written by the biblical King Solomon. The books showed readers how to seek angelic help to gain superhuman knowledge of the liberal arts, philosophy, and theology.

▲ Saintly lore
This painting shows the martyrdom of Cosmas and Damian, both of whom cured the sick. They also feature in some of the books about saints that began to replace pagan folk tales.



▶ Holy box of magical powers
Reliquaries were containers of relics—either actual physical remains of a saint or objects associated with a saint. This richly decorated French reliquary shows Christ at the center with Mary Magdalene on his left.


Hec exercicia que mundi philosophia
Per ge ans discit. vox. uttera. syllaba. amus tt.
Gram matica
Astrono mia
Rethorica
Salust
tabula
Caslanus vikes perge rethoricam ne queunt.
Hec elementorum scrutatur et abdita rerum
Carmina Maronis noyen trapor que dicuntur
Arte. regens. dia. que. sunt. septem.
Septem
Spiritus
Geometria
Dialetica
caput canis.
Natura universe rei
Socrates
plato
Philosophi sapientes
Arithmetica
Musica
Harpocratis vultus
Arte. septem. sunt. philosophia.
Hec arte sunt septem per quas pirigo curas
Arte regens. dia. que. sunt. septem.
Per ge ans discit. vox. uttera. syllaba. amus tt.
Hec exercicia que mundi philosophia
Carmina Maronis noyen trapor que dicuntur
Caslanus vikes perge rethoricam ne queunt.
Hec elementorum scrutatur et abdita rerum



ALBERT THE GREAT OF COLOGNE (1193–1280)

Justifying astrology

Albertus Magnus (Albert the Great) was a leading scholar who promoted the idea that all humans have free will. He was also an expert on astronomy and music, and reputed to be an alchemist and magician, famous for his *Book on Minerals*, one of the first great texts on mineralogy. He was said to have discovered the Philosopher's Stone—the miraculous stone that could turn base metal into gold (see pp.148–151). Albertus believed that the use of astrology and the study of the magical powers of plants and stones were forms of natural science—far removed from the evil summoning of demons that characterized necromancy. Albertus Magnus was made the patron saint of natural sciences in the 20th century.

Arab texts

In the early medieval period there was no concept of magic as a subject of organized study. The arrival of Arabic texts on magic, in Latin translation, in the 12th century had a big impact on the Christian world. Scholars would often translate books on occult sciences such as astrology, alchemy, divination, and magic alongside works of more conventional disciplines such as mathematics. In this way, magic became an established part of the scholarly scene, like astronomy and geometry.

Translators were excited by those Arabic magic texts that provided an insight into the workings of the cosmos, and some developed their own theories. Spanish philosopher and linguist Dominicus Gundissalinus argued that magic was a natural science—a legitimate area of scientific inquiry, providing insights into mysteries, such as the apparently magical power of magnets.

This idea of magic as a natural science, alongside natural philosophy, gained a hold among some intellectuals. For them, magic effects, if observable, were real and natural, even if only understood and controlled by a few.

◀ **Expressing divine marvels**
Philosophy and the liberal arts are encircled in this illustration from an encyclopedia compiled by Abbess Herrad of Landsberg, Alsace, in the 12th century. Magicians, along with poets, are shown excluded from the circle, and subject to evil inspiration (the black birds on their shoulders). As the century progressed, scholars sought to raise the status of magic.

Some scholars specialized in particular areas of magic in nature. Writers of lapidaries (handbooks on the powers of stones), such as Albertus Magnus, argued that the magic of stones was a natural quality bestowed by God. The Peterborough lapidary of the 15th century was by far the longest and most comprehensive, listing the occult properties of 145 stones. Such notions inspired ordinary people to incorporate stones into objects such as talismans, rings, and knives, given magical powers—through rituals with inscriptions or spells—to guarantee wealth or protect from disease.

Work of the Devil

Toward the end of the medieval period, the philosophical and theological debate hardened. The clergy began to demonize astrologers and alchemists, and paint magic as a pact with the Devil. The Church became increasingly split by heretical movements and, in 1230, the Inquisition was set up to protect it from dissenting voices. Practitioners of magic, especially scholars, risked accusations of *sortilegium* (sorcery), and so became secretive in order to protect themselves—but their very secrecy aroused suspicion.

▼ **Naturally magical**
This 13th-century English manuscript, the *Liber Additamentorum* ("Book of Additions") by Benedictine monk Matthew Paris, is illustrated with drawings of gems, rings, and cameos inset with precious stones, which people wore for their protective powers.



Crystals and gems

People have been attracted by the beauty of gemstones and crystals since the very earliest times and imbued them with the powers of magic and healing. The first written reference to the use of crystals for magic dates back to ancient Sumer before 3000 BCE, while the ancient Egyptians used lapis lazuli, turquoise, carnelian, emeralds, and clear quartz for rituals to promote protection and health—as do New Age crystal healers today.



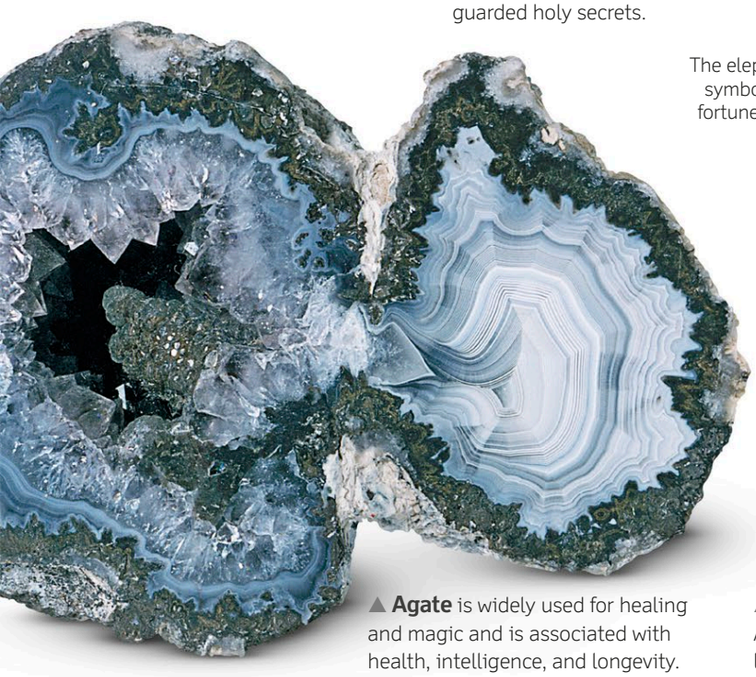
▲ **Ruby** is associated with energy, action, hope, and increasing motivation and passion. It is also said to strengthen the heart both physically and emotionally.



▲ **Sapphire** is linked with the third eye (a sign of enlightenment in non-Western traditions and New Age). Early popes wore sapphires in signet rings to signify that they guarded holy secrets.



▲ **Jade** is believed to have calming, protective powers and has been used as a healing agent as far back as 10,000 BCE. The term *jade* refers to one of two minerals—nephrite and jadeite; this Chinese vase is made of nephrite.



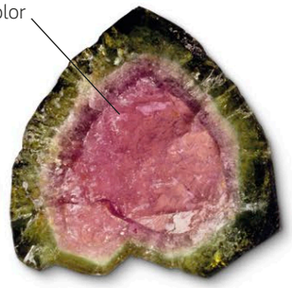
▲ **Agate** is widely used for healing and magic and is associated with health, intelligence, and longevity. It is made of microscopic crystals of silica and quartz, and is easily carved into shapes.



▲ **Emerald** was linked to Aphrodite, the goddess of love (called Venus in ancient Rome) by the ancient Greeks, and the stone is still said to bring love into people's life.



▲ **Citrine** is a form of quartz. Its color connects it to the power of the sun, and it is believed to confer positive energy, new beginnings, and willpower.



▲ **Tourmaline** is said to foster compassion and peace. It also gives off an electric charge when heated or rubbed, a quality highly valued by alchemists.



▲ **Obsidian**, molded here into a mask by the Olmec people of ancient Mexico, is a glassy stone formed from lava. It is said to reveal the truth and block out negative influences.



Strings of amber are said to soothe teething children; this bracelet is made of raw (unpolished) beads

▲ **Amber** is fossilized resin from prehistoric trees. The ancient Greeks linked it to the sun because it becomes electrically charged when rubbed. Spiritually, it is believed to absorb negative energy.

Carnelian, used for the head, was said to give courage





▲ **Carnelian** is linked with boldness, leadership, and power; in ancient Egypt, it was the badge of a master builder. Ring stones like this, engraved with human and animal heads, were worn by ancient Romans to protect them from the evil eye.

▲ **Jasper** is said to represent security, strength, and stability; it was often worn by ancient Egyptian spiritual healers, high priests, and kings for protection. This amulet has a jasper heart and may originally have been fastened to a mummy.

Turquoise is valued by Native Americans for its multiple benefits





▲ **Amethyst** means "sober" in ancient Greek, and it has long been said to protect against drunkenness and to instill a serious state of mind. It is also believed to be a natural tranquilizer that alleviates stress and grief.

▶ **Turquoise** is cherished by Native Americans as the blue stone of the heavens, which helps the wearer become one with the universe. This brooch was made by the Navajo people.

WORDS OF POWER

magical handbooks



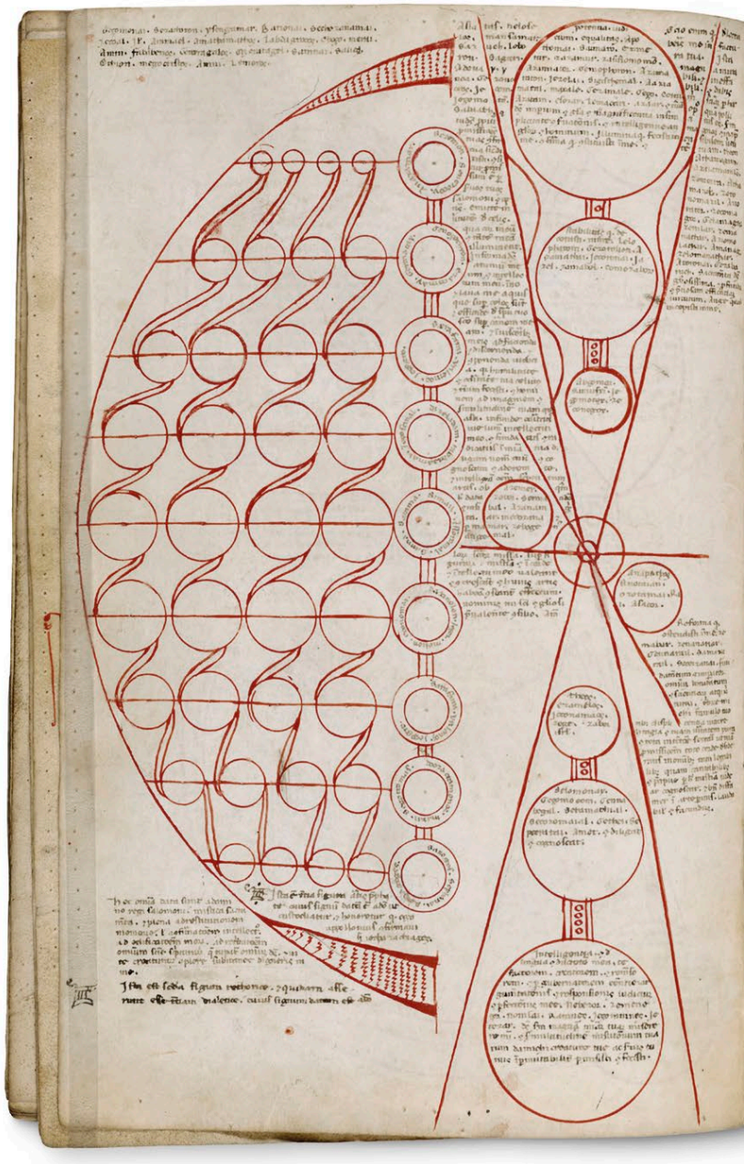
▲ **The magic of Solomon**
This is a page from *The Magical Treatise of Solomon*, which, it is claimed, contains instructions on magic given by King Solomon to his son Rehoboam. The earliest versions of this title date to the 14th century. Its subtitle is "The Art of Hygromancy"—that is, divining by water.

The medieval period saw the creation of many handbooks of magic, which later came to be called grimoires, from the French *grammaire* (grammar). Today they are sometimes referred to as Books of Shadows, a term first used for Wiccan grimoires.

The medieval Christian Church viewed these handbooks as dealing with either "natural" or "demonic" magic. Church leaders defined natural magic, such as harnessing the occult power of herbs for healing, as a legitimate use of the marvels of nature created by God, but they argued that demonic magic, such as necromancy, came from the Devil. Nevertheless, of the texts that survive in Europe, the clergy were the main writers on both kinds of magic.

Ancient sources

Medieval European handbooks on magic were mostly written in Latin, the international language of scholars at the time. Some of them had originally been composed by Islamic scholars in Arabic, or by Jewish scholars in Hebrew. In order to give their texts authenticity, authors often asserted that they were derived from much older sources, or written by ancient figures who had access to magical secrets that were lost during the spread of Christianity and Islam. It was even better if the figure was from the Bible, as this suggested the book had religious legitimacy. Several books of magic made rhetorical claims to be based on the writings of King Solomon, while 15th-century German abbot Trithemius owned a book supposedly written by Simon Magus (also know as Simon the Magician), who appears in the New Testament performing miracles, though Simon was denounced by Church leaders as a heretic whose magic had demonic origins.



▶ **Wisdom by incantation**
These red diagrams from a copy of the *Ars notoria* show the order of some of its incantations (in small black script), which consist of prayers and exotic names. If spoken correctly, these were believed to unlock the power of knowledge.

"This is the book by which anyone at all can be saved and be led forth into eternal life ..."

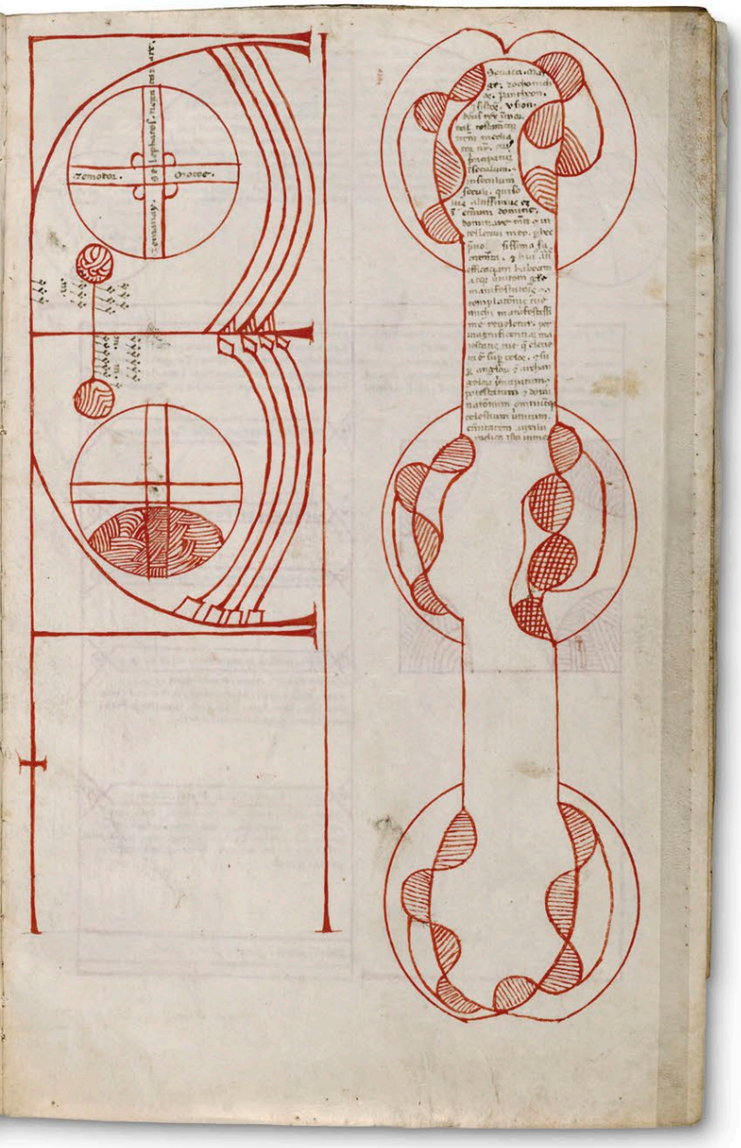
THE SWORN BOOK OF HONORIUS, 13TH CENTURY



▶ **Angelic assistance**
These pages from the 13th-century *Sworn Book of Honorius* give details of angels that the book's rituals aim to summon.

The Notary Arts

The most famous magical handbook was the *Picatrix* (see pp.82–83)—a book on astral magic originally written in Arabic—but there were other influential titles. One such was the *Ars notoria* ("The Notary Arts"), a collective title for texts that reputedly offered their users a shortcut to academic excellence and wisdom: Christian angel magic. The *Ars notoria* includes prosaic techniques for improving memory, as well as prayers to summon angels to give the user intellectual powers, such as mastery of languages. The earliest *Ars notoria* text dates from the 12th century, and it remained famous throughout and even beyond the medieval period.



The Sworn Book

Written later than the first *Ars Notoria* and probably influenced by it, *The Sworn Book of Honorius* is part of a group of "Solomonic" manuscripts—so called because their writers claim to have links to King Solomon—which contain prayers that call on the power of angels. Its opening pages state that it was produced after a council of magicians chose an author to record angelic knowledge. Made up of 93 chapters, the book covers a range of topics, from how to catch thieves and find treasure to how to summon "the evil spirits of the earth." No one knows its true origin, or who the supposed author, Honorius of Thebes, was. His name has also been linked to the Theban alphabet (see p.145) used by Renaissance occultists and later by Wiccans—an example of the continuing practice of creating authenticity by attributing ideas to famous figures.

IN CONTEXT

The future of the grimoire

Books of magic, including the famous *De occulta philosophia libri tres* by German occult philosopher Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, were among the first books to be printed after the invention of the printing press in the 15th century. Grimoires, as they are now called, have continued to be popular ever since, even though they were pushed out of the mainstream by the development of science and rationalism in the 18th century. In the 20th century new grimoires continued to appear, although many claim to be based on older originals. For example, the *Secret Grimoire of Turiel* (1927) is said to have come from a 16th-century transcript of a much earlier text.



This illustration from a demonology grimoire dates from 1775, but claims to be based on a 1057 original.

Wizards, kings, and dragons

From the late 12th century, French writers began to create stories for the elite called "chivalric romances." Often filled with magic, they focused on heroic, questing knights who lived by a code of loyalty, honor, and courtly love. Many of the most famous examples are about King Arthur.

Hinted at in Welsh legend, King Arthur may have been a 6th-century British king who won a victory over invading Saxons. But the story of Arthur as it is now told emerged in British cleric Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (1136). It inspired many Arthurian romances, such as that of French poet Chrétien de Troyes—the first to include the doomed love between Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere.

The Arthurian tales are rich in magic, featuring enchanted swords, vanishing castles, the quest for the Holy Grail (said to have miraculous powers, including granting eternal youth), and the famous wizard Merlin. Geoffrey of Monmouth first introduced Merlin, inspired by legendary Welsh prophet and bard Myrddin, in his *Prophetiae Merlini* (1135). In Geoffrey's interpretation of the legend of Merlin, the British King Vortigern's vision of a red and a white dragon fighting, shown here, represented the battle between Britons and Saxons—with the white (Saxon) dragon winning. Geoffrey also gave Merlin a magical adversary: the sorceress Morgan le Fay.



"Woe to the red dragon, for its death hastens: the white dragon will seize its caves …"

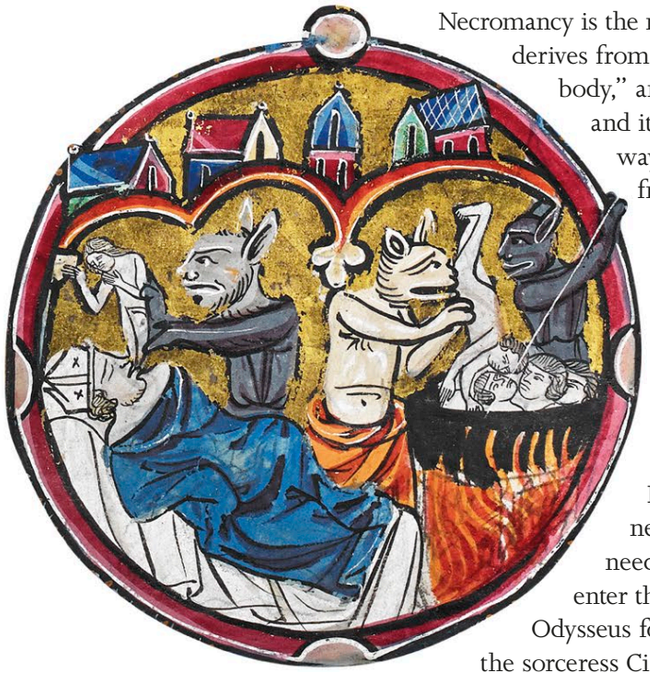
MERLIN IN GEOFFREY'S *PROPHETIAE MERLINI*, 1135



▲ **King Vortigern and Merlin watch the battle of the dragons** in this illustration from *St. Alban's Chronicle* (c. 15th century).

SUMMONING DEMONS AND THE DEAD

medieval necromancy



▲ **Demons and souls**
This detail from a 13th-century French manuscript describes a scene from the book of Maccabees in the Tanakh (Hebrew bible) in which demons take people's souls and put them in a cauldron.

Necromancy is the magic of the dead. The word derives from *nekros*, Greek for "dead body," and *manteia* for "divination," and it was used at first to mean a way of acquiring knowledge from the dead. In medieval times, it came to mean summoning the spirits to divine the future, gain hidden knowledge, bring someone back to life, or use the dead as a weapon.

Early beliefs

For the ancient Greeks, necromancy was the ritual needed for a living person to enter the underworld. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus follows a ritual outlined by the sorceress Circe to visit the underworld and find out what will happen on his voyage back. The Greeks did not believe that the dead knew more than the living, but in other cultures the view was that the dead were all-knowing. In the Bible, the Witch of Endor summons the spirit of the prophet Samuel for King Saul, and Samuel foretells Saul's death, which happens later that day.

▶ **Necromancer at work**
In this illuminated letter "M" from a 1481 manuscript copy of Pliny the Elder's *De Naturalis Historia*, a necromancer draws a magic circle and lays a flask of oil, a bell, and a handbook of ritual magic within it.

Centuries later, around 600 CE, the scholar Isidore of Seville believed that the dead spirits the necromancers called on were not the dead at all but in fact were demons. Medieval necromancy—also referred to as nigromancy (literally, "black magic")—was seen as an illicit art and defined as the act of summoning spirits and demons. Necromancers themselves insisted that they were not making pacts with the Devil but using God's power to bring spirits and demons under control.

Growing interest in ritual

From the 12th century onward, translations of Arabic texts into Latin, such as the *Picatrix* (see pp.82–83), sparked scholarly interest in elaborate ritual magic. The *Munich Manual of Demonic Magic* described ways to trace circles on the ground and fill them with symbols—the circle providing a protective space for the necromancer. However, magical demonic power could come at a price, and sometimes an animal had to be sacrificed for the spirits to communicate.

POPE SYLVESTER II (945–1003)

The wizard pope

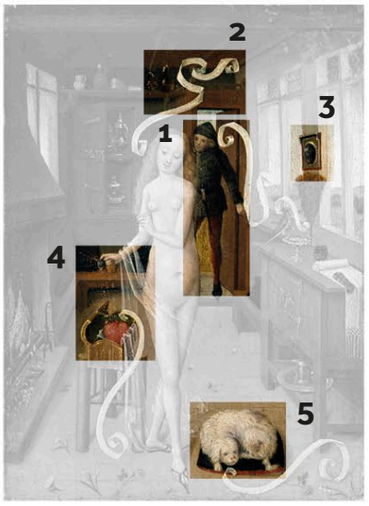
In the 1120s William of Malmesbury claimed that the French Pope Sylvester II (shown talking to the Devil, right) had been a black magician. A century later, in *Lives of the Popes*, Martin the Pole described Sylvester as a necromancer who had sold his soul to the Devil. In fact, Sylvester, originally Gerbert of Aurillac, was one of the greatest scholars of the age, and introduced Arabic numerals and the astrolabe to Europe. He was also an expert in music and built several organs.





"By the imprecations of necromancers, the resuscitated dead seem to prophesy and answer questions."

ISIDORE OF SEVILLE, *ETYMOLOGIAE*, c. 600–625



KEY

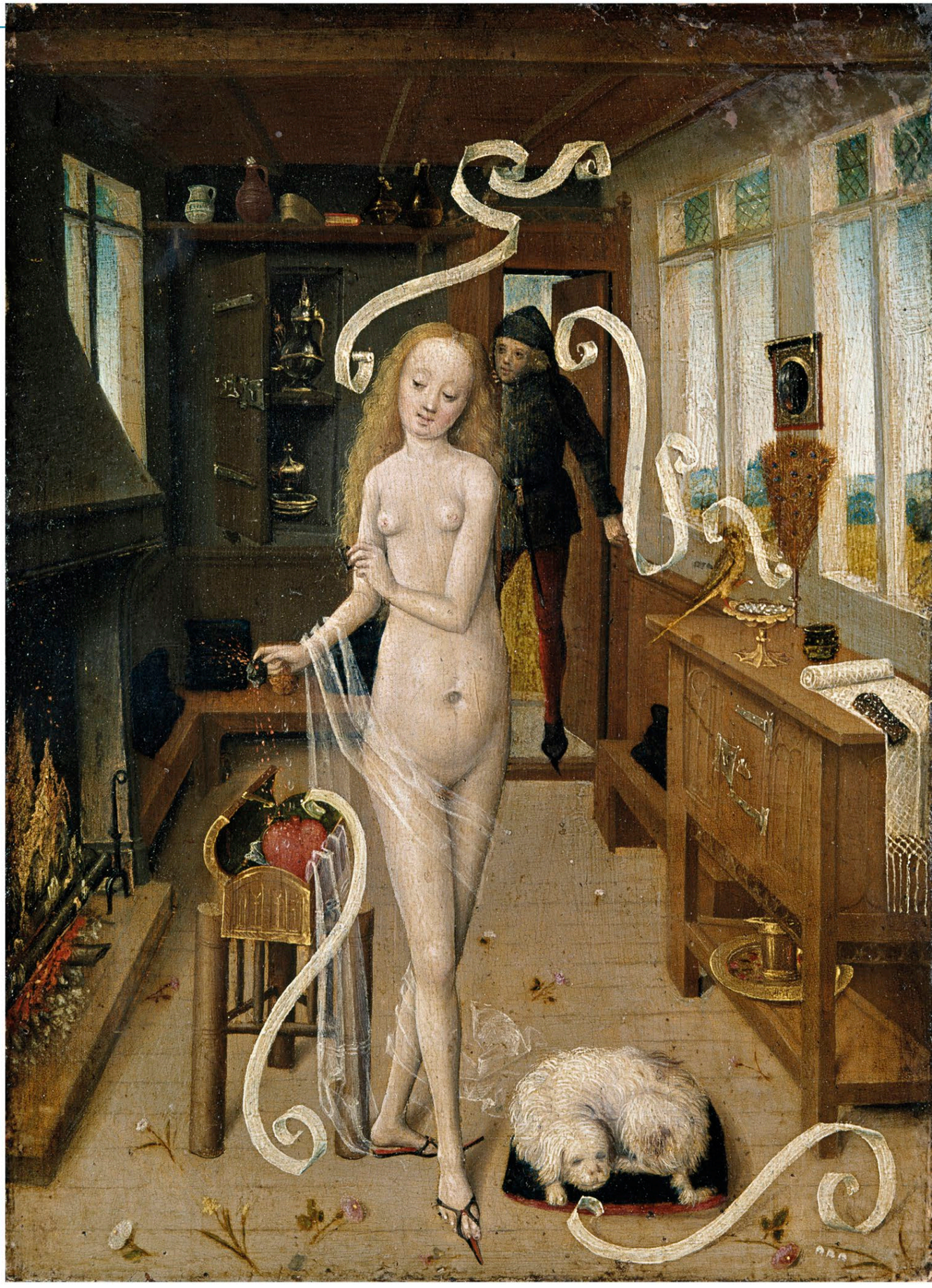
1 The man gazing at the woman (who ignores him) is too subservient to be the Devil; more likely, he is a servant.

2 Blank incantation scrolls are ready for spells to be written on them.

3 A mirror is often linked with witches.

4 The woman pours droplets of a potion onto a heart.

5 The lapdog is a familiar (companion and helpmate) suitable for someone rich.



▶ **Love and damnation**
The nude female body was a sign to medieval eyes of women's lasciviousness and of how susceptible they were to demonic temptation. Here, the woman's nakedness may indicate skill at love magic.

A PACT WITH THE DEVIL

witchcraft under scrutiny

According to the mythology that grew around witchcraft in the medieval era, witches, whether female or male, rejected the Christian faith and made a voluntary and subservient pact with the Devil. Some women were said to have had sex with the Devil in exchange for magical powers. The pacts were formal, sometimes taking the form of a written contract, and came to be used as the cornerstone of many prosecutions. Witches performed *maleficium* (harmful magic), too, and behaved unnaturally—flying, for example. They might also change into wolves, have marks on their bodies, and even practice incest or cannibalism. Such alleged behavior varied from place to place, depending on local tradition.

Divided opinions

In the early years of Christianity, witchcraft was looked upon as a perilous hangover from pagan times. Indeed, Augustine of Hippo in about 400 CE insisted that witchcraft was an illusion: it did not exist. In 643, Rothari, king of Lombardy, issued an edict saying, "Let nobody presume to kill a foreign serving maid or female slave as a witch, for it is not possible, nor ought to be believed by Christian minds." Two centuries on, however, opinion was divided. On the one hand, bishops at the Council of Paris in 829 decided that witchcraft was so dangerous that it should be punishable by death. Soon after, the Scots king Kenneth MacAlpin declared that all sorcerers and witches should be burned at the stake. On the other hand, the Canon Episcopi of 900 still declared that witchcraft was a delusion, and stated, for instance, that when women claimed to fly upon broomsticks at night, it was due to the Devil's mind tricks.

Targeting the weak

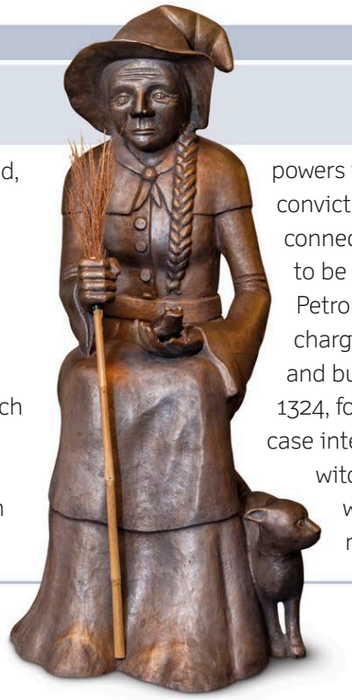
As the medieval era progressed, accusations of witchcraft increased. However, hardly any of those accused of witchcraft, female or male, practiced any form of magic, let alone witchcraft in the way scholars and Church men understood it—as a conspiracy between humans and demons to overthrow Christendom, and so a worse crime than *maleficium* alone. The accused was often poor and vulnerable, someone seen as an enemy wreaking havoc within the community or alternatively an outsider, such as a vagrant or beggar. Those charged were invariably persecuted.



▲ **Ways of the wicked**
A witch summons a demon with three animal heads in this woodcut c. 1550 from Sebastian Munster's *Cosmographia*, the first work in German to attempt to describe the whole world.

ALICE KYTELER (1263–AFTER 1325)

Rich witch



In 1324, Alice Kyteler of Kilkenny, Ireland, (represented as a witch in a modern statue at Kilkenny's Kyteler Inn, right) became the first woman tried for witchcraft as a heretic, and the first to be tried for acquiring magical powers by having sex with the Devil. Alice had become rich by marrying four times, each time taking control of her husband's business. Charges of witchcraft were brought against her by her stepchildren who believed she had used demonic powers to seduce their fathers. She was convicted, but had enough influential connections to flee the country, never to be seen again. Her maidservant Petronilla de Meath, however, was charged with being Alice's accomplice and burned at the stake on November 3, 1324, for heresy. Scholars find Alice's case interesting not just because of the witchcraft but also because of the way it shows women could manage businesses at this time.



▲ **Dance with the Devil**
Witches supposedly danced with the Devil at black sabbaths in the woods, as depicted here in the 17th-century *Compendium of Witchery* by Francesco Maria Gouache.

In 1390, the French Parlement of Paris passed an act against witchcraft and rapidly found four subjects—first Marion du Droiturière and Margot de la Barre, then Macette de Ruilly and Jehenne de Brigue—guilty. All four women were accused of using witchcraft and burned at the stake. All four, too, like Irish maidservant Petronilla de Meath, the first woman to be burned to death for witchcraft in the British Isles (see p.115), were convicted on the strength of confessions extracted under torture. The use of torture against women and men accused of witchcraft soon became the norm.

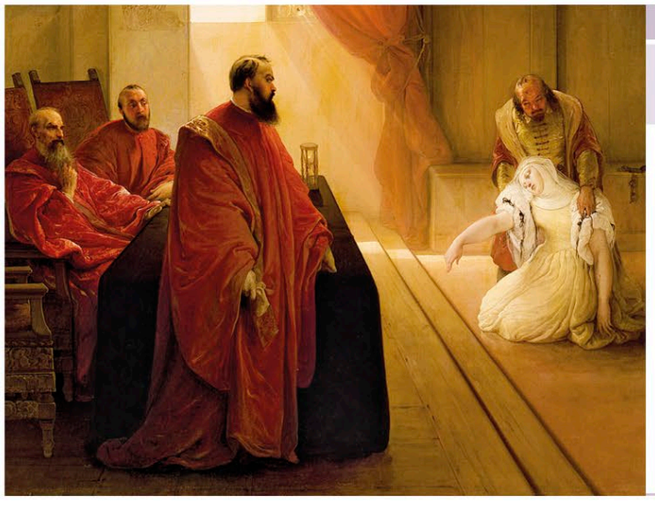
These first victims of the drive against witchcraft were all accused of using their magical powers to manipulate men. Their convictions were part of an increasingly misogynistic view of women as either chaste and saintly paragons in courtly romances or evil seductresses using sex to cheat and exploit men. Depictions of naked women were often linked to demonic power.

▶ **Trial by fire**
With his efforts to convert heretics, St. Dominic inspired Dominican monks to become the most zealous witch-hunters of the medieval era. Here, St. Dominic's true books miraculously survive a fire, while heretical books are consumed.

Heresy and the Inquisition

Misogyny is one theory that explains the increasing persecution of women as witches during the late medieval era. Another factor was the Church's war on heresy—beliefs that contradicted Church doctrine. Heretical groups such as the Waldensians and Cathars developed such a following in the 12th century that, in 1233, the Pope set up the Inquisition with wide-ranging powers to investigate, accuse, try, and punish heretics. Over the next few centuries the Inquisition built a fearsome reputation—torture was routinely used to extract confessions, and those accused of heresy who refused to confess were burned at the stake.

Magic was now considered more of a threat to the Church because it appeared to have much in common with heresy. Both were described as the work of the Devil and involved ignorance and excessive pride (for ignoring the Church) as well as trickery and deceit. Heretics began to fall under suspicion for sorcery and witches for heresy.



IN CONTEXT

Women, lust, and witchery

German Inquisitor Heinrich Kramer explicitly linked women and satanic magic in his sensational 1487 best-seller *Malleus Maleficarum*. Kramer believed that all witchcraft came from lust and that women were especially prone to witchery with their sexual appetites, spiritual weakness, and "natural proclivity for evil." The book was later banned by the Church and Kramer censured.

This historical painting from the 19th century shows a woman accused of witchcraft being brought before Inquisitors.





▲ **The Burning of Templars** is from *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* (“On the Fates of Famous Men”) by Giovanni Boccaccio, c. 1480.



The fall of the Templars

In 1307, Philip IV of France had the leading members of a powerful order of warrior monks, called the Knights Templar, arrested, tortured, and burned to death. Evidence of idol worship was produced at their trial. Soon after, Pope Clement had the order broken up, and ever since their name has been surrounded by rumors of satanic occult rituals.

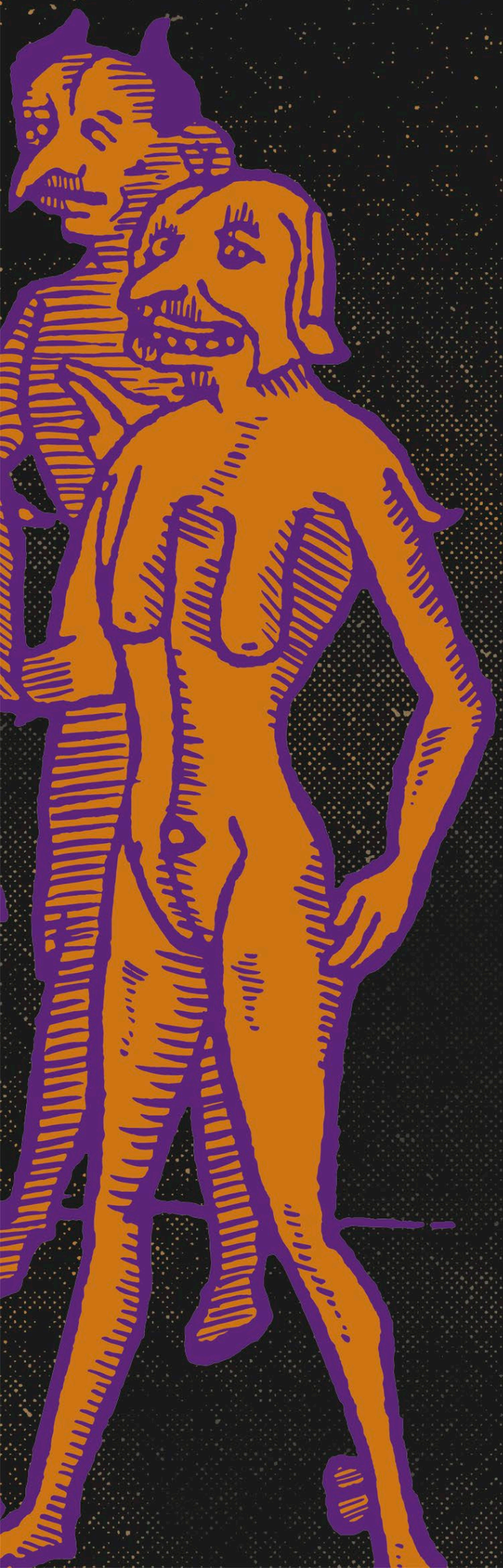
The Templars were founded in around 1119 by French knight Hugues de Payens to protect pilgrims journeying to the Holy Land. Their headquarters were on Temple Mount in Jerusalem, thought to be the site of King Solomon's temple. Membership of this elite fighting force was highly selective, with initiation rites so secret that revealing them was said to be punishable by death. As Europe's first bankers, the Templars were also immensely rich. Pilgrims left their valuables with them, then traveled with a proof of deposit, which they could use to withdraw funds en route.

However, the wealth and secrecy of the Knights Templar spurred resentment and suspicion. The Templars were accused of being heretics and myths grew up around them: that they spat on the cross and held dedications to the goat god Baphomet and to the Devil in the form of a black cat. Later it was speculated that they had discovered ancient occult knowledge in the Temple of Solomon, information so explosive it could bring down the Church, and even that they had possession of the Holy Grail and Shroud of Turin.

> "God is not pleased. We have enemies of the faith in the kingdom."

PHILIP IV, KNIGHTS' ARREST WARRANT, OCTOBER 13, 1307





SCHOLARS AND SABBATS

1500–1700

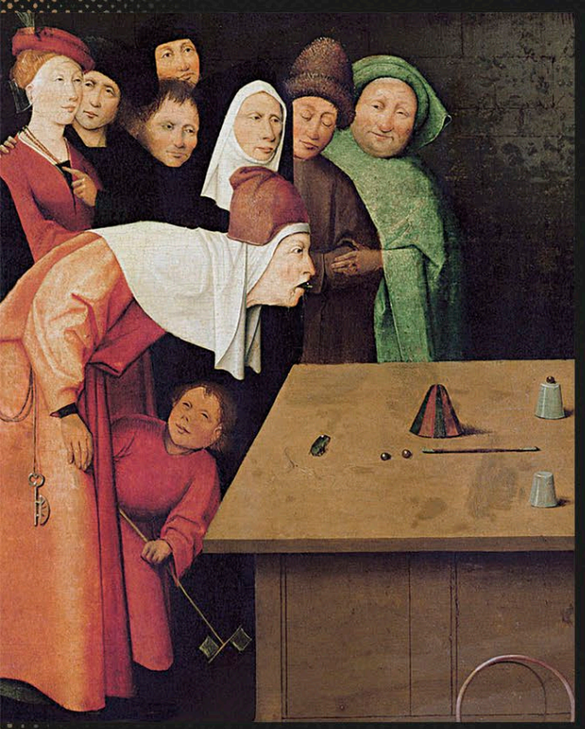
Introduction

Continuing from medieval times, Renaissance magic was often divided into high and low forms. High magic included scholarly experiments with alchemy (turning base metals into gold), while low magic encompassed popular folk traditions, such as local "cunning folk" providing spells to ward off warts.

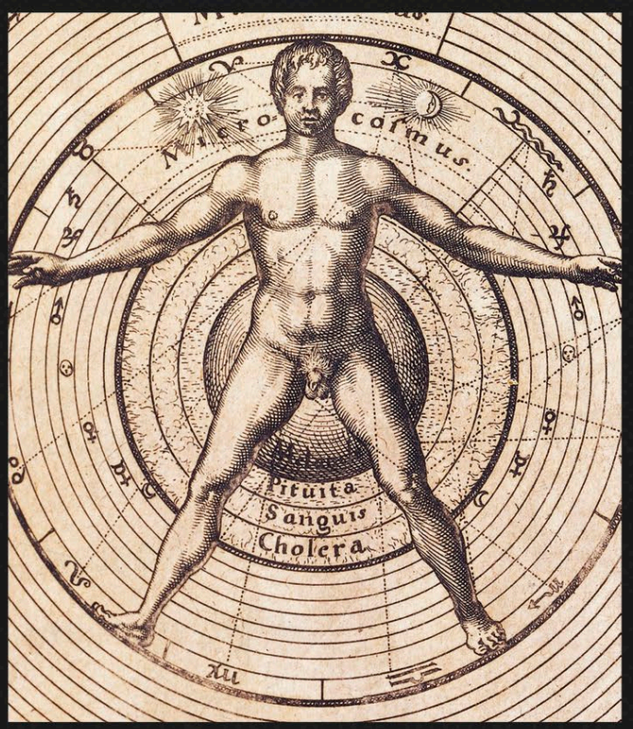
Practices were also divided into beneficial and harmful magic. European attitudes were often simplistic and arbitrary when deciding what was evil. At a time of much colonial expansion, Christian European colonizers frequently misconstrued indigenous non-European traditions as evil, heretical sorcery. In Mexico, for example, traditional Aztec occultism intertwined good and bad aspects—subtleties often misunderstood by the Spanish colonizers who crushed the Aztec Empire in 1521.

This was the period when the stereotyped persona of the evil female witch, so familiar today, became firmly fixed. The 1500s and 1600s witnessed by far the most intense era of anti-witchcraft legislation, persecutions, and prosecutions—from the 1640s witch hunts of self-styled British Witch-Finder General Matthew Hopkins and the Archbishop of Trier's German persecutions to the infamous trials of 1692–1693 in Salem, Massachusetts. Across Europe, thousands were executed for supposed witchcraft—men as well as women—although the Spanish Inquisition (the judicial body set up to stamp out heresy), at its peak at this time, was skeptical about witches and focussed instead on religious persecution of those straying from its rigid Catholic ideology.

The Renaissance stimulated intellectual inquiry in Europe that interwove different areas of knowledge, questioning humans' place in the universe, their relationship to God, and how the natural world worked. Ideas that would now be categorized as magical or occult then simply joined this complex brew. Magical strands were woven into important



The conjurer *see p.128*



Human life and the universe *see p.135*



Kabbalah tree of life *see p.136–37*

philosophies of the time, including Hermeticism, natural magic, and proto-sciences such as alchemy, which had its golden age during the Renaissance and which gave birth to modern chemistry.

Natural magic, based on various theoretical and experimental explorations into the nature of the cosmos, contrasted with ceremonial magic, which was about practice and steeped in mysterious ritual and symbols. Ritualistic Rosicrucianism and a Western Christian form of Kabbalah flourished at this time. The museum-laboratory of the German Kabbalist thinker Athanasius Kircher, sited in Rome, attracted visitors from across Europe to wonder at his seemingly magical demonstrations of magnetism and to gaze at specimens of supposed mermaids.

Both the Protestant Reformation and its Catholic response, the Counter-Reformation, took place in the Renaissance. The Christian Church was politically and socially powerful, many monarchs believed that they were God's appointees, and roles such as that of the Holy Roman Emperor bestowed vast power. So it was that many people of status, Protestant and Catholic alike, dreaded threats to their positions and consulted those steeped in the occult to allay their fears.

"The highest mountain, the oldest books, the strangest people, there you will find the [Philosopher's] Stone."

ATHANASIUS KIRCHER AND JOHANN STEPHAN KESTLER, *PHYSIOLOGIA KIRCHERIANA EXPERIMENTALIS*, 1680



Mysteries of alchemy *see p.150*



Condemned witches *see p.180*



Witch's poppet *see p.183*

CUNNING FOLK

popular practices



▲ **Medicine over magic**
As science advanced during the Renaissance, cunning folk were increasingly seen as dangerous quacks. This title page from a 1651 publication shows a patient being treated by a doctor while an angel bars a cunning woman from participating.

Historically, magic has often been divided into high, learned magic, and low, popular or folk magic, and this distinction held true between the 1400s and 1600s. Popular magic featured herbs and animals said to have special powers; traditional beliefs; and protective charms. It overlapped with folk healing and good witchcraft, as well as with some higher learned magic.

Central to popular magic were its practitioners, often called cunning folk. They were well-known members of local communities, and their low-key magic helped ordinary people with everyday problems, such as attracting a wife, banishing warts, improving crops, or gaining protection from malign witchcraft.

Cunning folks' skills embraced herbal medicine and midwifery, and some practices even borrowed from aspects of Christianity: for example, a spell linked to the herb vervain stated: "Hallowed be thou Vervain, as thou growest on the ground / For in the mount of Calvary there thou was first found." Popular magic was vital across Europe, and practitioners included the *klok gumma* (Sweden), the visionary *táltos* (Hungary), and the *benandanti* (Italy).

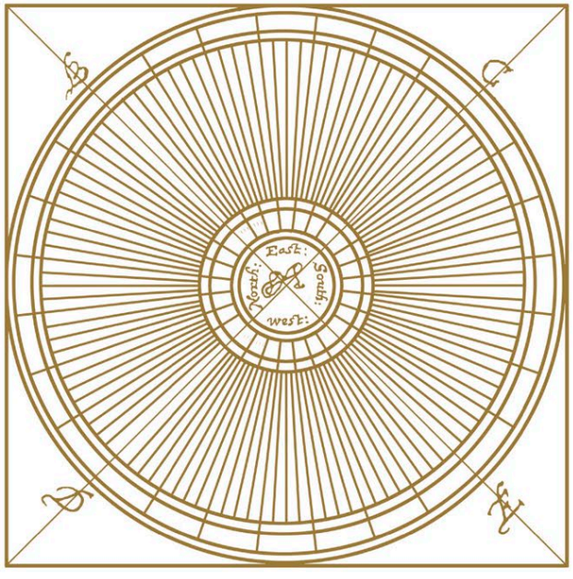
Persecution and problems

Many Renaissance folk practices were continuations from medieval times. However, in the 1500s spiritual dabblings were increasingly considered a threat to authority—that of the state and the Church—and legislation was sought to control them. What was perceived as harmful witchcraft was obviously a prime target, and indeed some cunning folk did follow darker arts, but benign practices could also be condemned. Nevertheless, despite fluctuating threats during the 1500s, the practices of cunning folk seemed to flourish in many ways.

This era brought with it some terrible events across the globe, from European plague pandemics in the 1500s and 1600s, to catastrophic earthquakes and floods—such as the Netherlands' St. Felix's Flood in 1530—as well as famine among 17th-century North American settlers. In addition, life was brutally hard for ordinary people. It is likely that popular magic brought much-needed solace to the poorest in society.

Magic circles

The art of using circles in ritual magic was a tool employed by some cunning folk, as well as more learned magic practitioners. The magic circle was a symbol of protection and of the summoning of spirits, and was often drawn protectively around those performing magic. Also called "conjuring circles," magic circles were often physically drawn on the ground.



▶ **The seal of secrets**
Designed to harness magical forces, this circle appears in the practice book of a 17th-century cunning man; it is said to represent "the seal of the secrets of all the world."



▲ **Circles for spells**
Here Dr. Faustus, from Christopher Marlowe's play (written c. 1590), invokes a demon from within a magic circle. Rising from humble beginnings, the clever occultist Faustus made a fatal pact with the Devil in order to increase his powers.

"If men have lost anything, if they be in any pain or disease, then they presently run to such as they call wise men."

ANTHONY BURGESS, *CXLV EXPOSITORY SERMONS*, 1656



◀ Witch bottle
People often blamed witches for their misfortunes. Some witch bottles contained pins to hurt the targeted witch, and they might also include an item belonging to the person said to be bewitched.

Sympathetic magic

Cunning folk employed many different strategies for their magic in the Renaissance. Some involved imbuing objects or animals with supposed powers based on symbolic links and correspondences—like for like. "Sympathetic magic" is a term used for an approach based on imitation and correspondence. For example, a liver disorder might be treated with a preparation made from an animal's liver; or a treatment might be administered while telling a metaphorical story that was somehow linked to the condition being treated, as it was believed to focus the appropriate energy.

Seeking patterns to reflect greater forces in the universe was another sympathetic tool, one used in the popular practice of palmistry. Marks, lines, and shapes on the palm were used to read a person's character and divine their future.

Countering evil

Counter forms of sympathetic magic were used to keep dark forces at bay—the practice of warding off evil is also called "apotropaic magic." One tool

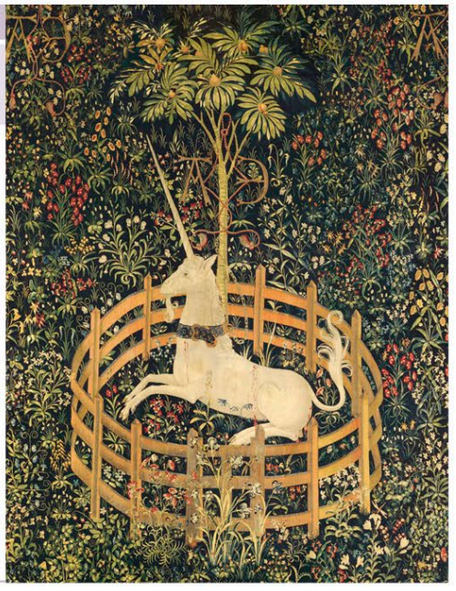
▼ A tale of transference
This painting by Florentine artist Paolo Uccello depicts the famous story of Christian hero St. George slaying a dragon, which often stood for evil. Destroying symbols of evil was a common form of sympathetic or transference magic.



IN CONTEXT

Fairies and folk wisdom

Cunning men and women frequently invoked, and had conversations with, an array of spirits that were generally thought of as fairies. In effect, fairies were a magic practitioner's familiar (spirit helper)—similar in some ways to the animal familiars that they also often used (see pp.186–187). For example, a cunning man might consult his fairy spirit guide to discover where someone's lost object was hidden. Other beings that featured in popular magic included elves and fantastical creatures such as the unicorn (pictured, right); so-called unicorn horns—in reality often narwhal tusks—were considered especially potent for magic and folk healing practices.



The Unicorn in Captivity is a Dutch tapestry, dated 1495–1505.

used for countering bad witches was a witch bottle containing a variety of materials, each said to have specific effects; for example, a person might put their own urine into the bottle along with pins, with the aim of making a witch feel pain when passing water. Sticking needles into a poppet (doll) that represented someone on whom harm was wished was another tool of sympathetic magic. Poppets were traditionally used for both good and bad (see pp.182–183) across Europe, in the American Salem witch trials, and in certain Voodoo rituals.

Sympathetic magic linked to the wider, ever more popular concept of universal sympathy, in which humans were believed to have close correspondences with the universe around them. In the Renaissance, this was promoted by many scholars of natural philosophy and Hermeticism (see pp.134–135).

Transferring power

The idea of transference was crucial to cunning folk—for example, placing a live chicken against plague buboes was believed to somehow transfer the illness to the bird. Similar practices included washing an ill child in water that was then discarded, in the belief that the illness would be transferred into the water, allowing it to be disposed of; and putting a healing potion onto the sword of an injured soldier was thought to transfer the healing benefit to him.

Household charms

People were eager to protect their homes from malevolent spirits. Items such as mummified cats, silver coins, and witch bottles were hidden in walls and chimneys to achieve this. Cats were significant because of their links with witches and reputation for detecting demons. Shoes were another hidden apotropaic item, probably because, molded by their owner, they were thought to contain that owner's spirit; their shape was also suitable for trapping demons. Protective symbols might also be marked around the house, such as on beams and windowsills.

▼ Lucky shoe
This man's left shoe, from around the late 1600s, was found in a wall between a window and chimney of a Cambridge University college. It was probably placed there to protect the college's master.



"When I was a Boy, our Countrey-people ... were wont to please the Fairies."

JOHN AUBREY, *REMAINES OF GENTILISME AND JUDAISME*, 1686–1687



▲ ***The Conjurer***—this is a 16th-century copy of an original painting by Hieronymus Bosch, now lost.



Magic or illusion?

Magic tricks date back to ancient times, and by the medieval era all kinds of magic were performed as street entertainment. Renaissance conjurers continued this tradition, bringing their illusions to marketplaces and fairs, as well as into the homes of aristocrats and royalty.

In this picture, an onlooker, who is fascinated by a magician's performance, fails to notice his purse being stolen. Frogs, apparently jumping from the onlooker's mouth, and an owl peeking from the conjurer's basket may symbolize heresy, devilry, clever bewitchment, or the loss of reason. On and around the conjurer's table are various tools of the trade, including those for the ancient "Cups and Balls" trick. Still popular today, this trick involves balls disappearing from under one cup and reappearing under another.

A Renaissance conjurer's repertoire included juggling, card tricks, and deceiving the eye with sleights of hand and illusions such as appearing to put a ring through a person's cheek. Two Renaissance texts contain some of the earliest published Western material on conjuring tricks. Luca Pacioli's *De viribus quantitatis* (*On the Powers of Numbers*, 1496–1508) included methods for performing tricks using numbers, illusions, and sleights of hand, while Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) used the existence of such tricks to link magic with trickery rather than evil-doing and showed that it was irrational to fear witches (see pp.184–85).

"Commoners will consider [it] a miracle."

LUCA PACIOLI, *DE VIRIBUS QUANTITATIS*, 1496–1508



▲ **Dark deity**
This human skull, covered in a mosaic of turquoise and lignite, is believed to represent the Aztec god Tezcatlipoca. Probably worn on the back as an ornament, it has been dated to the 1400s or early 1500s, during the height of the Aztec civilization.

THE SMOKING MIRROR

Aztec sorcery

In 1521, Spanish forces under Conquistador Hernán Cortés conquered the mighty Aztec Empire, which had dominated present-day central and southern Mexico since the 1400s. The Empire's beliefs were a blend of different Mesoamerican cultures, such as that of the Maya people, and their practices included a roster of deities, rituals, superstitions, divination, and spells. With the Spanish conquest came the conversion of indigenous people to Christianity. Much information about Aztec culture has been filtered through the viewpoints of the Spanish colonizers, or of those who were converted to Christianity. One such source is the *Florentine Codex*, created by Spanish missionary Bernardino de Sahagún along with indigenous helpers. Sahagún arrived in Mexico just after the Spanish conquest. While the colonizers often feared the customs they encountered and saw them as magical, they in fact represented the Aztec religion; Christianity, no doubt, would have seemed like sorcery to many Aztecs.

Gods and sorcerers

Two of the principal Aztec gods were Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl. Tezcatlipoca literally means "smoking mirror," giving this deity his nickname, "Lord of the smoking mirror." He is often shown



▶ **Double power**
This serpent was probably worn as a chest decoration during Aztec ceremonial rites. The double-headed snake spelled bad luck and, at worst, imminent death.

with his *tezcatl*, a polished mirror made of obsidian. Much used for black magic in ancient Mexico, the black mirror was associated with dark forces and may have symbolized Tezcatlipoca's all-seeing powers. He appeared in numerous guises, both good and bad: in some, he was believed to work black magic, and he also embodied, among other things, the wind and the night.

The god Quetzalcoatl took the form of a plumed serpent, with feathers from the local—sacred—quetzal bird. Snakes and serpents in general were believed to have magical and divinatory powers. Among other attributes, Quetzalcoatl was credited with inventing the calendar, which was a vital tool of Aztec divination. Through his association with the morning and evening stars, Quetzalcoatl also symbolized death and resurrection.

Shape-shifting transformations

Both gods and humans were thought to shape-shift into animals to perform various magical acts. Tezcatlipoca's animal form was the jaguar. Such animal spirits—often seen as protective helpers—were called *naguals*. This echoes ideas of witches' animal "familiars" that were widespread in Western folk magic at this time (see pp.186–187).

> "The night, the wind, the sorcerer, our lord."
>
> **FRIAR BERNARDINO DE SAHAGÚN**
> ON TEZCATLIPOCA, *FLORENTINE CODEX*, c. 1540–1585





Symbols of the 20 calendrical day signs

◀ Etched in stone
This Aztec Sun Stone (c. 1500), measuring 12 ft (3.7 m) across, found at Tenochtitlan, capital of the Aztec Empire, depicts a history of the cosmos and its eras, or suns. The central face is likely the sun god, Tonatiuh, with his tongue a symbolic sacrificial blade.

As with many philosophers and magic practitioners of the European Renaissance, the Aztecs placed great importance on astrology and astronomy. Close observations of the skies and precise time-marking fed into a complex calendar system of interlocking cycles, including a 20-sign zodiac, that was central to magic and ritual.

Counting the days

The calendar system related to ritual was called the *tonalpohualli*, meaning "the count of days." It formed a 260-day cycle, with sub-sections ruled by various gods, and divinatory uses including the casting of horoscopes. This cycle consisted of 20 periods, each 13 days long. Each day in the calendar had a number (1–13) combined with one of 20 "day" signs that included a lizard, a flint, or rain: so a day might be identified as "1-Rain" or "13-Lizard." Each combination recurred once every 260 days. Lucky or unlucky days, based on the characteristics of the associated number, day sign, and god, were considered vital for all kinds of things, from planting crops to making offerings to the gods. A person's day of birth could also be used to predict their fate. Days with 13 in the name were thought to be favorable due to links with the 13 principal Aztec gods, while a 1-Wind or 1-Rain birth day might be associated with turning into various types of dangerous sorcerer and casting spells.

Divine tools

Aztec culture was filled with magic practitioners, including *teixcuepani* (illusionists), *temacpalitotique* (sorcerer–thieves), *tlacatecolotl* (sorcerers known as "owl men"), *ticitl* (physician–diviners), and *tonalpouhqui* (soothsayers). Many objects were invested with special or divinatory powers, such as maize kernels, which were cast on the ground to form meaningful patterns. Rods might also be cast to determine which god was responsible for an illness.



◀ Casting maize
Overlooked by the wind god, here a diviner casts maize kernels onto a cloth to read their patterns, as shown in the 16th-century *Codex Magliabechiano*. Maize divination could also involve casting the kernels into water.

"I am the strength of the world …
I am the one who knows how to fly."

PART OF A TRADITIONAL-STYLE AZTEC RITUAL CHANT

The Aztecs believed in magical afflictions sent by the *tlacatecolotl*, and hallucinogens such as peyotl might be taken by cursed people to help *ticitl* identify the curse.

Sorcery or satanism?

One famed figure from Aztec myth is the *tlahuipuchtli* (luminous sorceress) Malinalxochitl, who was widely believed to inflict unpleasant deaths on her enemies. Today people from the Mexican town of Malinalco, which was allegedly founded by her, still carry the reputation of being magicians.

To the Aztecs, ritual sacrifice of humans and animals was a vital and honorable part of pleasing the gods. Yet colonizers considered it a satanic and barbaric practice. As the European view came to dominate, the meaning and cultural context of the practice were often overlooked or misunderstood.



▼ Revered rituals
This image from the *Tovar Codex* depicts three priests making ritual offerings to prevent drought. The first priest (far left) bears burning incense in the form of a tree resin called copal, which was often used in Aztec ceremonies.

PHILOSOPHICAL MAGIC

Hermeticism, divinity, and the universe



▲ **Master theorist**
Hermes Trismegistus (center) is depicted on the floor of Siena Cathedral. The supposed creator of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, he is described here as a contemporary of Moses.

Hermeticism (or Hermetism) refers to a set of philosophical and theological ideas that were much discussed in Renaissance Europe. One important idea centered on the belief in a spirit that unified the universe and everything in it. A human being was a microcosm (miniature) of the universe, which was the macrocosm (the whole of the complex system).

New ways with old ideas

Many Renaissance ideas now labeled Hermetic were in fact Platonic, and came from the ancient Athenian philosopher Plato via Roman scholar Plotinus, who developed a concept of a oneness underpinning the universe in the 3rd century CE. A key work of the Hermetic tradition was the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a selection of Byzantine texts that explored the mystical nature of divinity and the universe, and how this related to humankind. All these ideas were rediscovered in 15th-century Florence. Around 1460 the scholar Marsilio Ficino began translating a Greek version of the *Corpus* into Latin. His 1471 translation included two treatises: the *Asclepius*, containing material about ritual magic, and the *Poimandres*, which included passages on astronomy-cosmology.

The *Corpus Hermeticum* takes the form of dialogues between young men and the legendary figure Hermes Trismegistus, which literally means "thrice-greatest Hermes". He was often seen as a conflation of two pagan gods—the Egyptian Thoth (see p.25) and the Greek Hermes. The *Corpus Hermeticum* was reputed to have been written by Hermes Trismegistus and to be ancient Egyptian wisdom that had been passed on to the Old Testament prophet Moses and Plato.

Scientific advances

Certain practical implications of Hermeticism, such as putting nature to the test through experiments, appealed to many intellectuals interested in science in the Renaissance. Their exciting new ideas about how the universe worked became entwined with magic. Radical Italian philosophers, including Giordano Bruno (see panel, below) and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, melded Hermeticism with

> "How many bodies have we to pass through … before we hasten to the One alone?"
>
> *CORPUS HERMETICUM*

GIORDANO BRUNO (1548–1600)

Free thinker

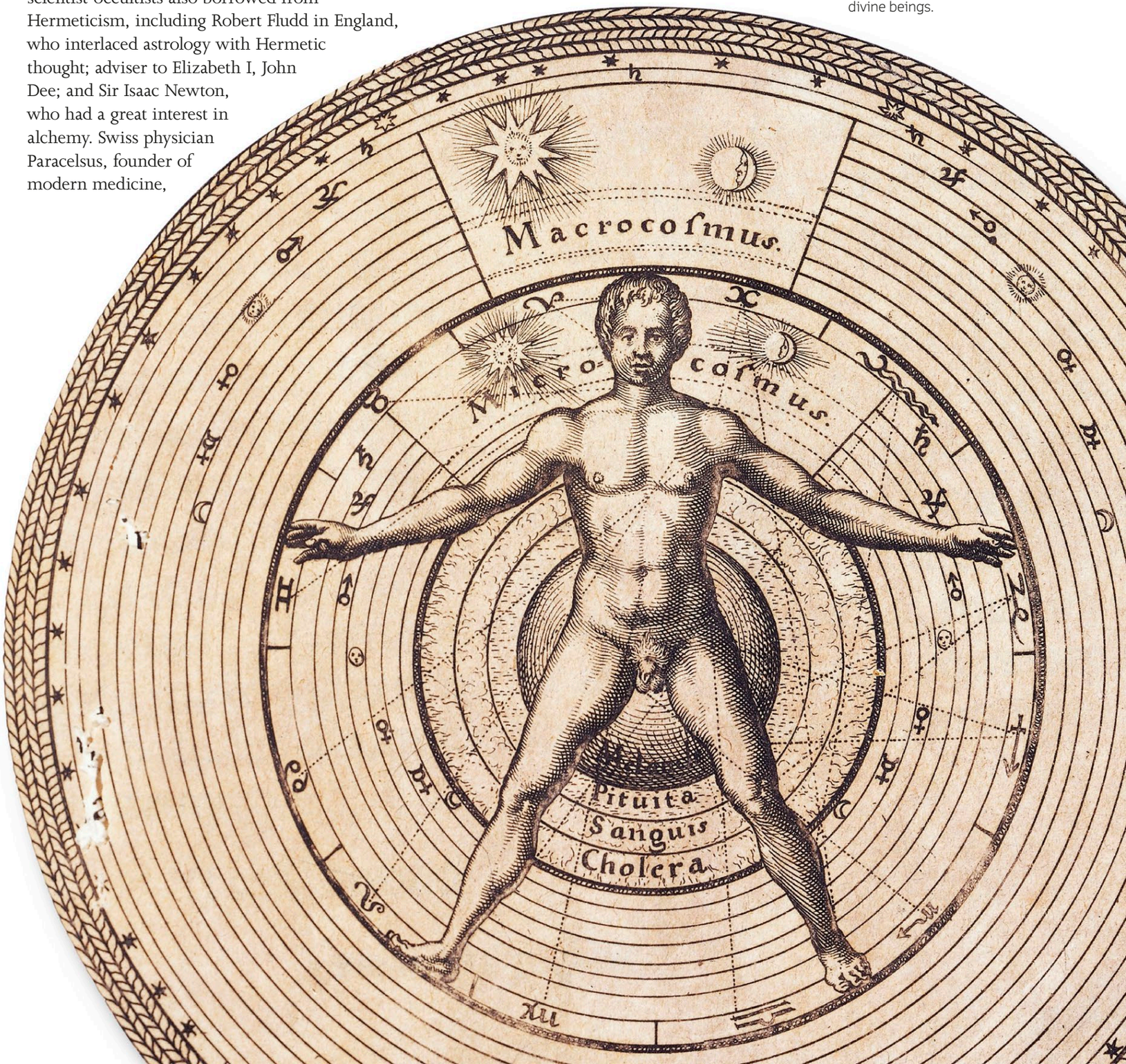
One radical who responded to Hermetic precepts was the controversial Italian philosopher and occultist Giordano Bruno. He wrote various essays on magic, stating that "Magicians can do more by means of faith than physicians by the truth." His ideas often involved natural magic, such as the natural attractions and repulsions between things, and sought new truths about the forces of existence. Bruno's concept of an endless universe and universal soul included notions that many felt were occult and blasphemous, such as implying Christ's miracles were simply clever conjuring. In 1600, the Italian authorities executed him on charges of heretical beliefs.



This bronze statue was built in 1889 on the site of Giordano's execution in Campo de' Fiori, Rome.

natural philosophy, natural magic, and other magical forms. Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* started with a quote from Marsilio Ficino's *Asclepius* and was written to accompany his own controversial 1486 text *900 Conclusions*, which proposed that Christ's divine nature could be proven by magic and Kabbalah (see pp.136–139).

Outside the Italian city-states, Renaissance scientist-occultists also borrowed from Hermeticism, including Robert Fludd in England, who interlaced astrology with Hermetic thought; adviser to Elizabeth I, John Dee; and Sir Isaac Newton, who had a great interest in alchemy. Swiss physician Paracelsus, founder of modern medicine, linked diseases to the damaging influence of certain stars in the Hermetic united universe. Like Paracelsus, Cornelius Agrippa saw magic as a key to the meaning of life and considered Hermes Trismegistus to be one of the first authorities on magic. Hermeticism had an impact on later occult movements, too, such as the 19th-century Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (see pp.242–243).



▼ Uniting the universe
Robert Fludd's diagram (c.1617) shows the microcosm of man, or human life, within the macrocosm of the greater universe. Fludd's microcosm listed the four personality types, while his macrocosm included the sun, moon, and planets, as well as higher divine beings.

SECRETS OF THE DIVINE

the Kabbalah tradition



▼ **Celestial ladder**
Taken from Ramon Llull's work *De Nova Logica*, this woodcut illustrates his concept of organizing ideas as a ladder. The ascending steps, or ladder, signify moving up from everyday life into celestial realms.

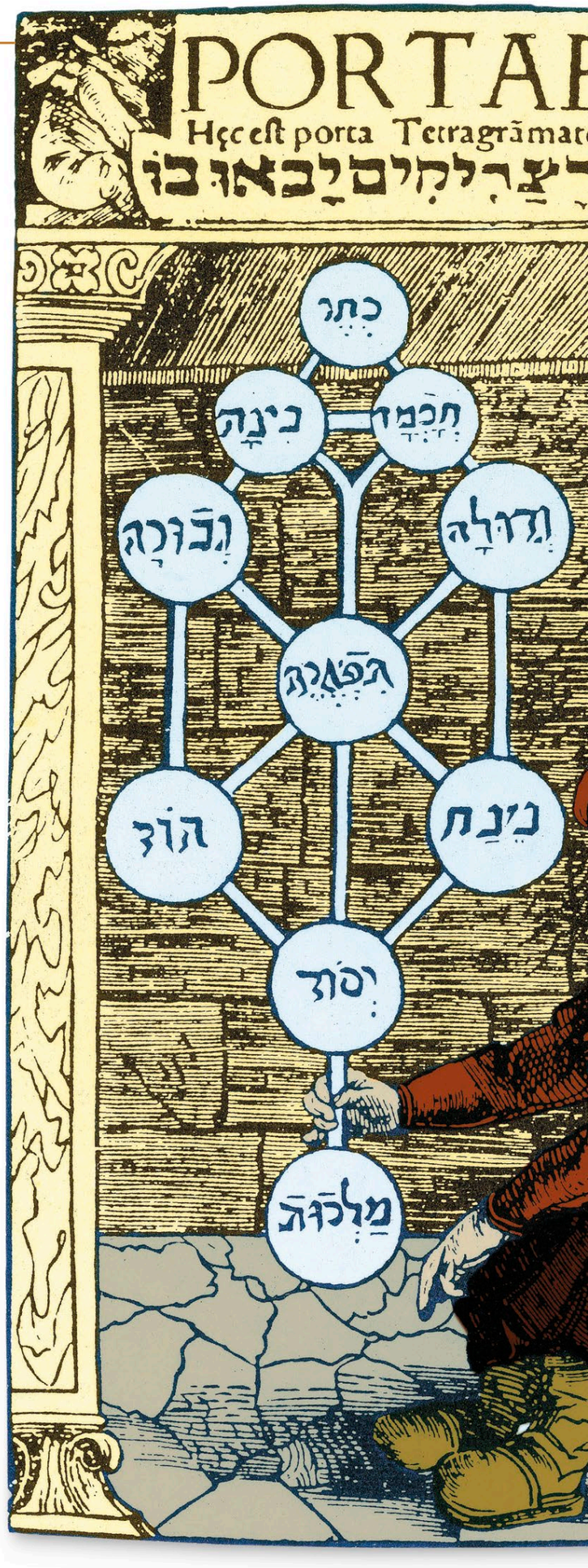
Kabbalah beliefs are notorious for occult leanings and for being kept secret: one such belief, that humans share divine "sparks" from the godhead, helps promote this sense of mysterious knowledge. Different spellings include Kabbalah, Cabbala, and Qabalah and these are often associated with specific traditions, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Hermeticism, or occult practices. The form Kabbalah is often used as a general term.

Many Renaissance kabbalistic ideas stem from medieval Jewish magical mysticism, which included esoteric methods such as the use of symbols (specifically of the Hebrew alphabet) to interpret the Tanakh (Jewish bible). A fertile mixture of Jewish-Islamic esoteric traditions emerged in countries with Islamic and Arabic populations, such as Spain, that gave rise to other kabbalistic practices including the use of arcane symbols and talismans to pursue mystical knowledge. Cryptic signs, letters, and numbers were at the core of Western Kabbalah, too.

Christian Kabbalah

A Christian form of Kabbalah flourished in the Renaissance, colored by the era's Hermeticism (see pp.134–135). Christian Kabbalists explored complex notions of the universe's unity and eventually embraced all religions, gaining Kabbalah a vital place in the West's history of magic.

One precursor to Renaissance Kabbalah was the work of 13th-century Christian mystic Ramon Llull of Majorca. Some now see his theories in a semi-kabbalistic way, including his use of figures similar to the *sephiroth* (see p.89) in Jewish Kabbalah. Early Christian Kabbalah was also influenced by the many



▶ **Esoteric doctrine**
A colored version of the important tree of life illustration from Gikatilla's influential *Gates of Light*. The tree's 10 spheres relate to 10 emanations that represent God's divine nature and creative energies.



Jews living in Spain who converted to Christianity, such as Pablo de Heredia whose *Epistle of Secrets* is often seen as the first significant work of Christian Kabbalah. When, in 1492, non-converted Jews were expelled from Spain, Kabbalah spread across Europe.

The tree of life

Renaissance Christian Kabbalists included Pico della Mirandola (see below); Johann Reuchlin, who wrote *On the Art of Kabbalah*; Cornelius Agrippa, whose *De Occulta Philosophia* linked Kabbalah and magic; and Paulus Ricius, translator of Joseph Gikatilla's *Gates of Light* (see left), said to contain the first non-Jewish image of the tree of life. A symbol drawn from Jewish Kabbalah, the tree of life links with Hermetic ideas of unity between humanity, divinity, and the universe, and with the Hebrew Tetragrammaton—an ordering of four letters used to express God's name.

> "… the magician is the minister of nature and not merely its artful imitator."
>
> **PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA**, *ORATION ON THE DIGNITY OF MAN*, 1486

GIOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA (1463–1494)

Father of Christian Kabbalah

Mirandola was among the first to introduce Kabbalah into Christian and Western culture. He promoted an interest in ritual magic within Christianity, and his writing drew together strands including Jewish mysticism, Platonism, humanism, and Hermeticism. Mirandola distinguished beneficent, natural magic—linked to God's divine workings—and natural philosophy from harmful magic. In 1486, he planned to defend a collection of his ideas, known as *900 Conclusions*, before a gathering of scholars from all over Europe, but the assembly was forbidden and his theses were condemned by the papacy.





KEY

1 The central light emanates from the Hebrew Tetragrammaton "YHWH," letters important in Kabbalah to represent God.

2 Light rays emanate from the figure representing day, and bounce off the mirror.

3 The title means "The Great Art of Light and Shade." In a play on words, "magna" could be translated to mean "magnetic" instead of "great."

4 The figure of night is clothed in stars.

5 The double-headed eagle is a symbol of Kircher's patron, Ferdinand II.

▶ **Decoding the divine**
The title page taken from Athanasius Kircher's work *Ars magna lucis et umbrae* (1646) interweaves the science of optics with esoterica and features kabbalistic symbolism.



▶ **Warding off trouble**
Perhaps used as a protective talisman, this 17th-century kabbalistic image features at its heart a Hebrew Menorah—seven-branched candelabrum—composed of words. The branches symbolize seven branches of universal knowledge.

Evolving practices

During the 1600s, a number of scholars began to make connections between branches of Kabbalah and emerging philosophical, scientific, or religious ideas. Abraham Cohen de Herrera tried to reconcile Kabbalah with philosophy, while Christian Knorr von Rosenroth's *Kabbala Denudata* provided Christian Kabbalists with translations of texts from Jewish Kabbalah.

The long-established distinction between meditative and "practical" Kabbalah (see p.87) persisted, the latter often still associated with magic. This was primarily due to its use of signs, symbols, and words—particularly those with links to the names of God or the angels—to interact with the divine and influence reality, rather than simply as a means to deeper understanding. Practical Kabbalists aimed to effect change through rituals and talismans, such as meditating on the meanings of the tree of life or inscribing the name of an angel on a metal disk.

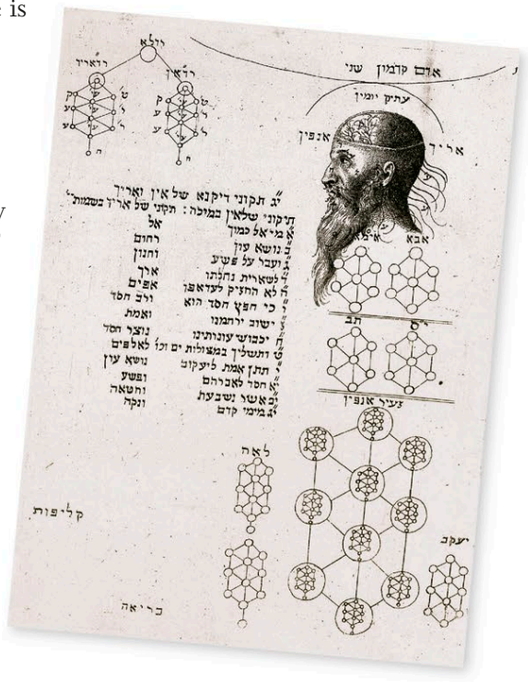
Unlocking the universe

German Jesuit priest Athanasius Kircher is often called the last man of the Renaissance, due to his prolific academic pursuits. He was a revered scholar whose studies encompassed Egyptology, mathematics, medicine, astrology, numerology, and the deciphering of complex codes. Drawn to unlocking secrets, marvels, and great universal forces, Kircher undertook an investigation into understanding ancient Egypt's hieroglyphs, a popular endeavor of those interested in esoteric matters. His interests led him to make links between Kabbalah and Egyptian mythology. His esoteric pursuits were important to the Hermetic branch of Kabbalah because of his belief in a universal knowledge that unified humans and their cosmos, and brought all fields of knowledge together. His version of the tree of life is still used in Western Kabbalah.

Moving on

Toward the end of the 17th century, there was decreasing interest in the Christian form of Kabbalah, most likely prompted by the corresponding rise of modern science. However, Kabbalah continued in various guises, including esoteric forms of Judaism and certain occult practices, while its influence also persisted within some branches of Hermeticism.

▼ **Kabbala's Christ**
This image taken from *Kabbala Denudata* (1677–1684) by Christian Knorr von Rosenroth—the Christian Kabbalist and Hermeticist—shows the head of "Adam Kadmon" or "The Great Countenance," seen by many Kabbalists as a universal Christ figure.



"The world is bound with secret knots."

ATHANASIUS KIRCHER, *MAGNETICUM NATURAE REGNUM*, 1667



▲ **Divine touch**
This mid-17th-century fresco shows French king Francis I, an advocate of the divine right of kings, offering his healing touch to those with scrofula during his visit to Bologna in 1515.

THE HIGH ARTS OF RITUAL

ceremonial magic

The performance of ceremonial (ritual) magic gained momentum during the Renaissance. In contrast with natural magic (see p.144), which celebrated the innate wonders of nature, ritual magic involved the use of specific actions, ceremonies, and tools in a set order, often with the aim of summoning spirits. So a natural magic practitioner might focus on the stars themselves, and a ceremonial magician on invoking astrological spirits as a part of their occult practice.

Official sanction

Although the Catholic Church was intolerant of any non-Christian rituals or any magic that it saw as a threat to its supremacy, the use of ritual was already embedded in practices accepted by both the Church and the state. For example, Christian priests routinely followed an array of rites. Another officially acceptable rite, which had parallels with magical healing, stemmed from belief in the divine



▶ **An angel's gift**
Dee claimed that the angel Uriel gave him this crystal in 1582. Symbols or spirits supposedly appeared in it, helping heal illness or predict the future.

right of kings: the concept, which persisted throughout the Renaissance, that kings and queens were semi-divine beings whose authority came from God. Many Renaissance monarchs embraced the idea of divine right. People thought that kings and queens held special powers, so they believed that being touched by a monarch, or touching a coin that the monarch had touched, could cure diseases such as the lymphoid illness, scrofula (known as "the king's evil"). Great ritual ceremonies were held in which hundreds of afflicted people received a healing royal touch. The power of the monarch's touch was seen as miracle-working and, as the king was considered God's representative on earth, such rituals were presented as more religious than magical—although their exact status was ambiguous.

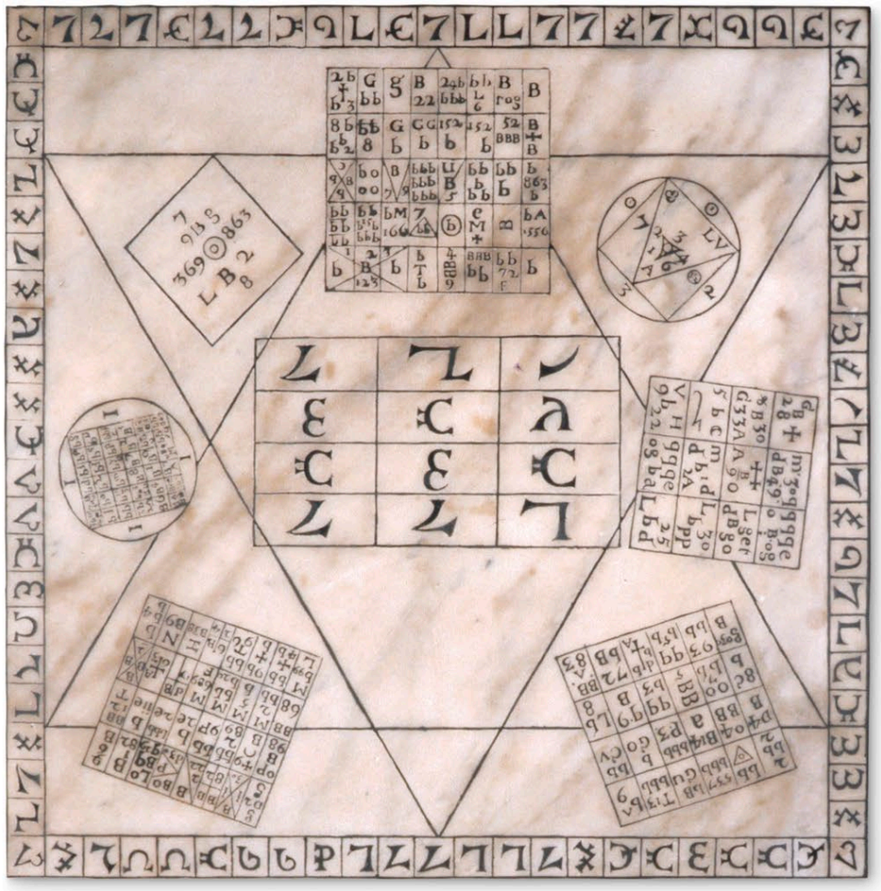
Speaking with angels

Thaumaturgy (the concept of working wonders or miracles) was central to the work of 16th-century British mathematician-occultist John Dee. He also promoted Enochian magic, a ceremonial practice that used a web of signs, symbols, and number codes to try to summon and commune with angel spirits, such as the archangels Gabriel and Uriel, in order to gain knowledge. Dee claimed, in effect, to contact the divine through a practice based partly on the apocryphal Judeo-Christian Book of Enoch, in which Noah's ancestor, Enoch, is taught the mysteries of heaven. There was also an Enochian language, a special alphabet supposed to date back to the creation of the world. Dee used Enochian letter-grids, reportedly to communicate with angels, who spoke to him by selecting letters that formed sentences. He described his angelic conversations in several works, including his magic handbook *De heptarchia mystica* (1582).

Seeing the future

Dee developed complex number systems for his divinatory rites. The number seven was pivotal, partly because there were said to be seven planetary spheres. With Dee's associate Edward Kelley acting as medium, the pair also used scrying devices such as mirrors or crystals (crystallomancy) to receive the teachings of the angels.

> "O comfortable allurement, O ravishing persuasion …"
>
> **JOHN DEE** ON NUMBERS, PREFACE TO EUCLID'S *ELEMENTS OF GEOMETRY*, 1570



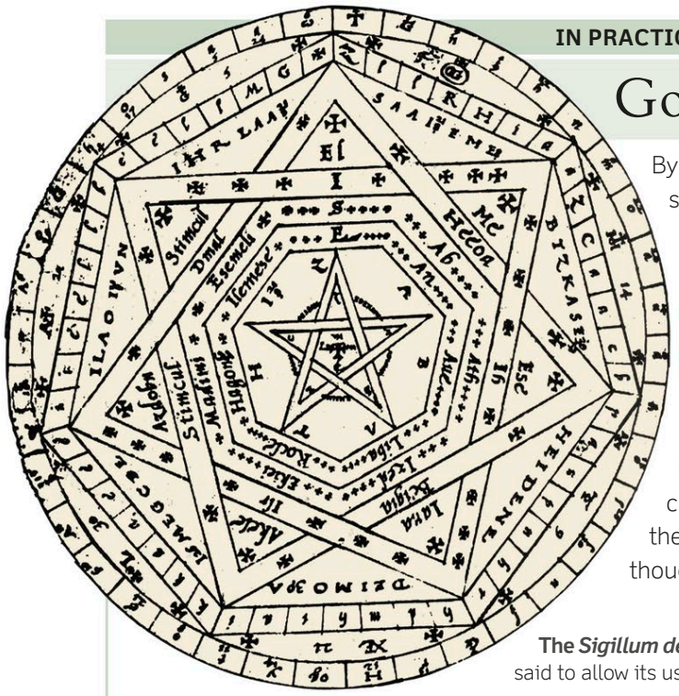
▶ **The holiest of tables**
This is a 17th-century marble copy of Dee's wooden Holy Table, complete with Enochian letters, with which the angels were said to spell out messages for Dee and Kelley. Dee made the wooden original in 1582 according to angelic instructions delivered to him via Kelley.

IN PRACTICE

Goetia versus theurgy

By the Renaissance, writers such as Agrippa were splitting ceremonial magic into two types: goetia and theurgy. While goetia is often used to refer to the summoning of demons (anti-God forces), theurgy is identified with rituals that engage beneficent power.

Theurgy (from the Greek for "divine action") uses magical practices, such as scrying, to invoke and seek help from good spirits, often angels—representatives of God. Theurgy therefore involves humans uniting with the divine. However, theurgy was criticized by religious authorities who were skeptical of the concept of communicating with angelic spirits, and thought they might be demons in disguise.



The *Sigillum dei* (Seal of God), a powerful symbol, was said to allow its user to engage with virtually all spirits.

Forces of darkness

Different types of ritual practice were used for angelic and demonic magic, and both included learned, academic approaches. While some wonders of ceremonial magic echoed Christianity and biblical miracles, those miracles that were ascribed to someone other than God ran the risk of being labeled as demonic magic. The work of Dee and Kelley was condemned as such at least once. While Dee regularly advised on scientific, philosophical, and occult matters to royals and nobles in England and Europe, in 1555 he was arrested and imprisoned in Britain on charges including witchcraft and conjuring (although later released).

"Behold the mysteries of the seal of Solomon which I bring forth unto thy power and presence!"

THE LESSER KEY OF SOLOMON, 1600s

Ceremonial magic certainly had a dark side. This had two aspects: one was intrinsically evil magic; the other was magic that, its practitioners claimed, only engaged with dark forces in order to subdue and banish them.

Complex ceremonial magic, such as Dee's, drew on mathematics, alchemy, an analysis of the cosmos, and Middle Eastern astrology to create highly involved rituals, diagrams, and talismans thought to engage the power of the stars and the cosmos. These practices could be used to summon demons as well as angels, and the dividing line between good and bad magic was often unclear—those who engaged with demons could claim they sought to vanquish them.

The wisdom and sins of Solomon

During the Renaissance, the form of ritual and ceremony most often associated with evil magic was goetia (see above). The term was typically used to refer to magical practices that aimed to summon demons, especially those associated with Solomon, the biblical Israelite king.

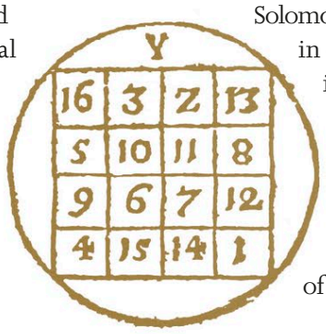
Solomon—a figure in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—was known for his great wisdom and for building the first Temple of Jerusalem. He was imbued with magical attributes in all three

traditions, including power over spirits and demons. He is also said to have fallen from divine grace after failing to put his worship of God before earthly matters. This rich set of characteristics made him attractive to followers of many kinds of ritual magic, and resulted in the development of a form of magic with Solomonic features.

Seals and symbols

Solomonic magic rituals often included symbols linked to a magic ring, the Seal of Solomon, said to have been a gift from God that gave King Solomon power over demons. Symbols involving shapes and stars with five, six, or seven sides or points were commonly associated with Solomon's ring, and were often surrounded by a circle. These were represented on artifacts known as pentacles that were said to act as protective talismans, or to have the ability to invoke or repel spirits.

Many books believed to have been written by Solomon or to be based on his wisdom were in circulation during the Renaissance, including the *Lesser Key of Solomon*, an anonymous spell book from the mid-1600s that gave directions on how to contact both angelic and demonic spirits. The popularity of such texts is testament to the allure of this strand of ceremonial magic.



▶ **Cosmic squares**
Magic-square talismans used astrological magic to try to draw on planetary forces. In this 1651 Jupiter square, the numbers total 34 when added in any direction.

▲ **Summoned from hell**
In this 15th-century image, five demons, led by Belial, appear before Solomon and Moses. Solomon was said to influence demons using holy power, but some magicians sought to use this influence for corrupt purposes.

MAGIC AND EARLY SCIENCE

natural and occult philosophy

In the melting pot of Renaissance Europe, early distinctions between superstition, pseudoscience, and science were explored and formed. Natural philosophy (the study of the natural world) and occult philosophy (the study of powers said to be hidden in nature) were important in this process.

In the medieval period, the bishop William of Auvergne had defined natural magic as magic that made use of powers inherent in the natural world. The occult philosophy of the Renaissance was a companion and, in some ways, a successor to the study of natural magic. At this time there were overlaps between magic, philosophy, science, and religion, and some natural philosophers also sought to reveal the hidden natural causes of phenomena that appeared to be miraculous or supernatural.

Magic and natural philosophy

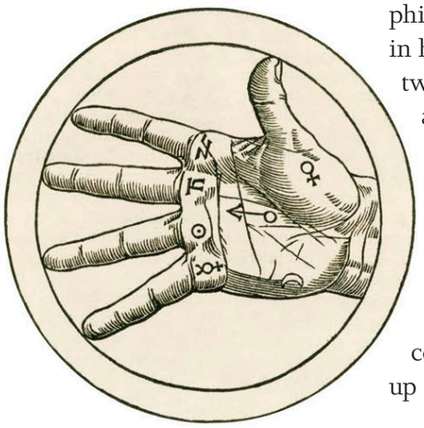
Natural philosophers studied the universal forces involved in aspects of astronomy, alchemy, and living things. They examined objects such as the sun, moon, plants, and rocks in terms of their physical properties, trying to identify and explain these by establishing general laws of nature. As Italian philosopher Pico della Mirandola (see p.137) said in his *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (1486): "… magic has two forms. One consists wholly in the operations and powers of demons … The other proves … to be nothing else but the highest realization of natural philosophy."

The occult as a force for good

The magic studied by occult philosophers, seen as "good" and relatively scholarly, was contrasted with ceremonial magic, which called up spirits via rituals of theurgy, and goetia (see p.143). Both science and magic were infused with Christian ideas. For example, alchemists saw parallels with the Resurrection in their mystical transmutation of metal into gold. The Church was largely unconcerned with areas such as astrology, but mixing religion with other disciplines required a fine balance and risked accusations of heresy. Yet, like followers of both Christianity and Hermeticism (see pp.134–135), occult philosophers sought the underlying principles of a divine natural order.



▼ Between the lines
This engraving from Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia libri tres*, an important work of occult philosophy, shows lines and areas on the hand associated with zodiac symbols. Such guides were a cornerstone of Renaissance palmistry (also called chiromancy, or palm reading).



"As in Magic Natural, so in Divine."

AGRIPPA, *DE OCCULTA PHILOSOPHIA LIBRI TRES*, 1530s

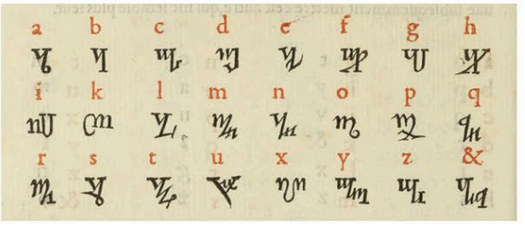


◀ Mapping the universe
This celestial map from the 1600s is by Dutch-German cartographer Andreas Cellarius. Exploration and astronomical studies were core facets of Renaissance culture, and astronomy was an important branch of natural philosophy.

IN CONTEXT

The Theban alphabet

The so-called Theban alphabet, a writing system with equivalences to the Latin alphabet, took hold in the occult world during the Renaissance. Often given an original attribution to Honorius of Thebes, a mysterious (and possibly mythical) writer of the medieval period, it was first published in Johannes Trithemius's *Polygraphia* (1500s). Agrippa included it in his work *De occulta philosophia libri tres*—although a later text than *Polygraphia*, this is often considered to be the alphabet's first significant appearance and certainly gave it prominence. Historically, this alphabet was frequently used to keep the content of magical writings secret, and much later it was adopted by Wiccans (see pp.264–267).



The Theban alphabet is shown here in the polymath Johannes Trithemius's 16th-century work *Polygraphia*.

Skepticism and the occult

One influential occult philosopher who clashed with Christian authorities was the German scholar Agrippa, who is considered to have made the first important distinction between ritual magic and the combined disciplines of natural magic and natural philosophy in his 1530 text translated as "On the Uncertainty and Vanity of the Arts and Sciences: An Invective Declamation". Agrippa was a skeptic, which in philosophical terms means that he pursued his studies with a spirit of inquiry, rethinking all accepted knowledge. He widely promoted natural magic and tried to unite different strands of knowledge in works such as *De occulta philosophia libri tres*, and believed that God's divinity underpinned everything, including beneficial magic. Mirandola and Italian scholar Marsilio Ficino also belonged to this Hermetic-influenced world of expansive inquiry, and Agrippa inspired other figures, such as Giordano Bruno (see p.134), with his Hermetic ideas.



▲ **Humans and their world** Created by or in imitation of the 17th-century Swiss artist Matthäus Merian, this anthropomorphic landscape can be turned on its side to reveal a human face. Links between humanity and the natural world were important to philosophy, and disguising forms to explore philosophical allegories was a popular artistic pursuit.

Unlike occult philosophers, natural philosophers made advances in protoscience (emergent forms of science, such as experiments in alchemy that formed the basis of chemistry)—although they did not always differentiate it from natural magic or pseudoscience (information claimed to be scientific, which proves not to be when judged by the values of modern mainstream science). Much of their work laid the foundations for the Enlightenment and the modern scientific revolution; but some is now part of the history of the occult arts.

Fact and fiction

There are historical overlaps between magic, protoscience, and pseudoscience, because natural philosophers, occult philosophers, and alchemists treated their work as a serious investigation of the universe. Some approached the truth, at least in part. For example, it is actually possible to turn lead into gold, as the alchemists hoped (see pp.148–151), but it is misleading to explain this, as they did, in terms of the zodiac or the movement of celestial bodies.

Religion, too, played a role in the story of pseudoscience and protoscience, being a vital ingredient in magical thought (particularly the definition of natural magic). In contributing to such thinking, it also helped foster the early development of natural science.

Living in harmony

The work of Paracelsus illustrates the intersection of protoscience with pseudoscience and natural magic. This Swiss astrologist, alchemist, physicist, chemist, and physician was a major figure in both medical science and early chemistry, but also held views consistent with occult philosophy. He drew on Hermetic belief, Kabbalah, and Rosicrucianism, and made important inquiries about humanity's place in the universe. Such ideas, often cloaked in complex allegory, can be seen in the era's artworks,

> "Magic has power to experience and fathom things which are inaccessible to human reason. For magic is a great secret wisdom, just as reason is a great public folly."

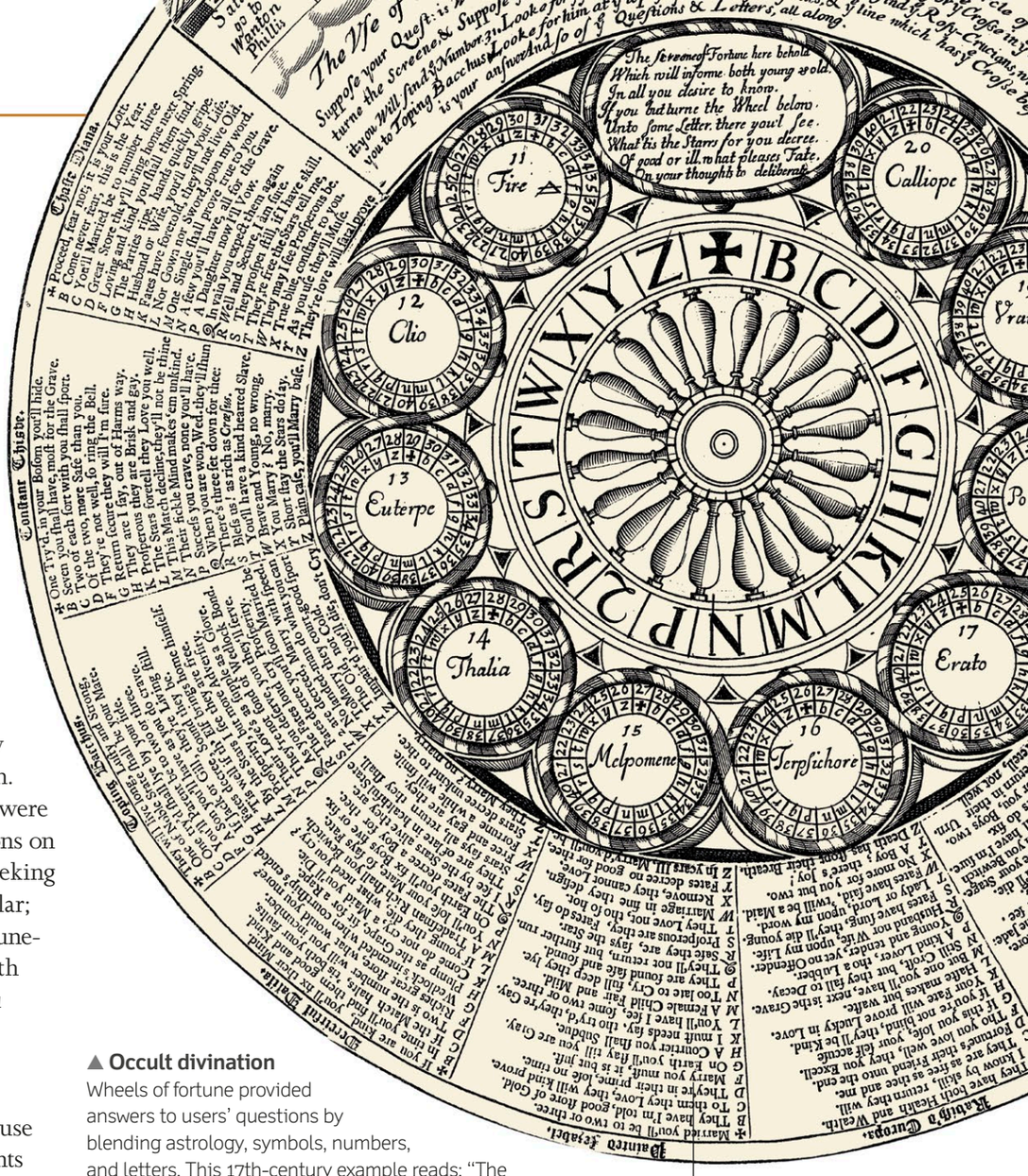
PARACELSUS, *LIBER DE OCCULTA PHILOSOPHIA*, c.1500s–1600s

such as anthropomorphic paintings (see left) in which the landscape forms a human face, echoing both the Christian idea that people reflect God's creation, and the Hermetic idea of humans as a microcosm of the natural world around them.

Paracelsus's studies were rooted in observation, experimentation, and an interest in how different substances form associations with each other. His work can be viewed as an example of an early empirical approach to science, but he saw a special kind of magic in his methods.

The power of prophecy

Renaissance philosophy contained a seemingly contradictory mix of prophecy and rationalism. At a time when the first scientific experiments were taking place, occult philosophers gave instructions on how to predict the future. Astral divination (seeking wisdom by reading celestial bodies) was popular; the wealthy collected astral talismans and fortune-telling games appeared. There were overlaps with natural philosophy, too: in *Coelestis physiognomonia* (1603), Italian scholar Giambattista della Porta presented astral divination in more naturalistic terms. His earlier treatise *Magia naturalis* (1558) had explored how natural philosophers could use philosophical thinking and practical experiments to probe the mysteries of a natural world that is underpinned by a rational unity rather than magic.



▲ Occult divination
Wheels of fortune provided answers to users' questions by blending astrology, symbols, numbers, and letters. This 17th-century example reads: "The Screene of Fortune here behold / Which will inform both young and old / In all you desire to know."

Turning the wheel selects one of a choice of outcomes listed around the edge



SIR ISAAC NEWTON (1642–1727)

Newton's nature

English physicist and mathematician Sir Isaac Newton is considered one of the greatest figures of the scientific revolution that began in the Renaissance and continued to flourish during the Enlightenment. Yet he probably saw himself principally as a natural philosopher. Newton was fascinated by how religion and practices such as alchemy contributed to an understanding of the natural world and its forces. Believing himself to be chosen by God to divine such truths, he undertook alchemical experiments. He also owned a large collection of alchemical texts, including one known as the *Musaeum hermeticum*, which refers to the Philosopher's Stone (see p.149), and another that says of alchemy, "… its occult may be made manifest only to men elected by God."


Aqua
Alembi
bium
Alembi
tum

FANTASY OR SCIENCE?

the golden age of alchemy

The story of alchemy is one of magic versus science, of secrecy and symbolism, and of seeking perfect understanding in order to achieve transformation. Alchemists explored the nature of matter; pursued a holy grail of turning base metals, such as lead, into gold; and sought perfection of the body and soul.

The Renaissance was a golden age for alchemy. Its practitioners built on traditions said to have begun in the ancient world—including links between alchemy and Hermeticism (see pp.134–135, 150–151), both of which claimed Hermes as a founding figure—and added new layers of knowledge and symbolism. Their work contributed to the split between early modern science and more esoteric material, which also occurred during this period.

Alchemy and chemistry

Renaissance alchemy also had connections with the alchemy of Arabic practitioners, such as Geber (see p.150). Arabic influence might be seen in the terms "chemistry" and "alchemy," which were often used interchangeably during the Renaissance: although the root of "chem," found in both, is much disputed, it may be derived from the Arabic word *kimiya* (transmutation).

Many Renaissance alchemists carried out what we would now consider scientific research, laying the foundations for later laboratory work in areas such as chemistry and medicine. However, at the time, many were considered charlatans, duping people with promises of riches. By the early 1700s, modern science was emerging, and "alchemist" was the name increasingly given to those chasing what began to be perceived as unscientific magical goals—such as the creation of gold. The work of Belgian scholar Jan Baptista van Helmont is often said to represent the shift from alchemy to science: he believed in alchemical principles, but also held that knowledge of nature could only be gained by experimentation.

◀ Precursor to chemistry
This image of a double still comes from German surgeon and alchemist Hieronymus Brunschwig's 16th-century distillation manual. A pioneering book on chemistry, its ideas borrowed heavily from alchemy.



All things must change

Transmutation and purification—turning something base into something better—were concepts central to alchemy, as were attempts to create the elusive Philosopher's Stone, which were shrouded in secrecy. The Stone was believed to enable great feats: not only the ability to turn base metals into precious ones, but also the curing of illness, the attainment of immortality (through the related Universal Panacea and Elixir of Life), and the purification of the soul. Behind such beliefs lay the ancient idea that all things naturally strive to achieve perfection.

▲ Fixing the volatile
This 1600s or 1700s illustration is based on the earlier, unillustrated text of the *Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine* (1599), a work that details 12 steps to creating the Philosopher's Stone. The flowers may symbolize purified precious metals.

Secrecy and symbols

In order to achieve their aims, alchemists followed a secretive multi-staged process, much of it laden with symbolism linked to religion, natural philosophy, and popular magic. It involved ritualistic practices and sequences of numbers, but also procedures that we would recognize from modern science, such as distillation (see left).



▼ Pursuing the Stone
This "Ripley Scroll" is named after the influential 15th-century English alchemist George Ripley. The red and green lions represent sulfur and mercury respectively: two central ingredients for making the Stone.

IN CONTEXT

Ancient parallels

Alchemy gained strong roots in the West during medieval times, via diverse international influences that stretched back much earlier: alchemical concepts are found in the traditions of China (see p.51), India, Greece, Byzantium, and the Muslim world. Western alchemy owed much to Arabic ideas, many seemingly derived from a figure called Geber, a Western name used to refer both to Jabir ibn Hayyan (c.700s)—traditionally hailed as an important Arabic alchemist—and to a later European author-alchemist.



This print from 1584 portrays Arabic alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan.

The stages involved in trying to create the fabled Philosopher's Stone, also called the Great Work, varied in number and type. There were often either seven of them, as in the 16th-century *Splendor solis* (see below and pp.152–153), or 12, as in the *Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine*. Sets of numbers linked with symbols were all part of alchemy's secretly coded world, in which astrology figured large. Alchemical materials and processes were thought to be linked with the numbers, nature, and workings of heavenly bodies, and the zodiac and astrological symbols were used widely. For example, one Renaissance-era system presented 12 "gates," or stages, associated with the 12 zodiac signs, in the following order: Calcination (Aries); Congelation (Taurus); Fixation (Gemini); Solution (Cancer); Digestion (Leo); Distillation (Virgo); Sublimation (Libra); Separation (Scorpio); Ceration (Sagittarius); Fermentation (Capricorn); Multiplication (Aquarius); and Projection (Pisces).



▶ **Born again**
Ideas of regeneration and resurrection ran throughout alchemy. In this image from *Splendor solis* (1500s), a crowned angel offers a cloth to a man rising from a dank swamp. His black and red coloration reflects two of the stages in the alchemical process.

Colorful progressions

Western alchemists pursuing the Stone wanted their laboratory processes to produce colors in a certain order. There were four stages, although some texts mentioned more. The "Nigredo" stage, linked with blackness, came first; then "Albedo," the white; a third yellowing stage (less commonly mentioned), "Citrinitas"; and finally a fourth stage, "Rubedo," identified by a purple or reddish color that meant the "red stone" had been successfully created.

The symbolism of alchemical texts was closely tied to these color progressions, so, for example, a crow might represent the Nigredo stage, or a peacock, with its stunning tail unfurled (see p.153), might represent a stage that aimed to bring about a dazzling array of colors.

As above, so below

Renaissance alchemists also owed much to Hermetic ideas (see pp.134–135), notably those found in a text called the "Smaragdine Tablet" or "Emerald



Tablet." Traditionally attributed to the legendary figure of Hermes Trismegistus, it is now thought to be of Arabic origin and to date from the 500s to 700s. An inspiration for alchemists, its cryptic text was thought to contain alchemical secrets and Hermetic ideas of achieving balance between each human and the cosmos. It influenced such eminent Renaissance figures as John Dee, Isaac Newton, and the 16th-century doctor and alchemist Paracelsus, whose innovative contributions to medicine were based on such ideas of balance. Hermeticism's core principle—the existence of a universal force uniting the microcosm with the macrocosm—is often expressed with the phrase "As above, so below," itself a summary of the Tablet's words: "That which is Below corresponds to that which is Above, and that which is Above corresponds to that which is Below, to accomplish the miracles of the One Thing." For alchemists, the "One Thing" was a reference to their ultimate goal: the Philosopher's Stone.

▲ **Cryptic carving** Alchemist Heinrich Khunrath's *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae* (1609) includes this fanciful imagining of the green stone tablet on which Hermes Trismegistus is reputed to have carved his Emerald Tablet text.

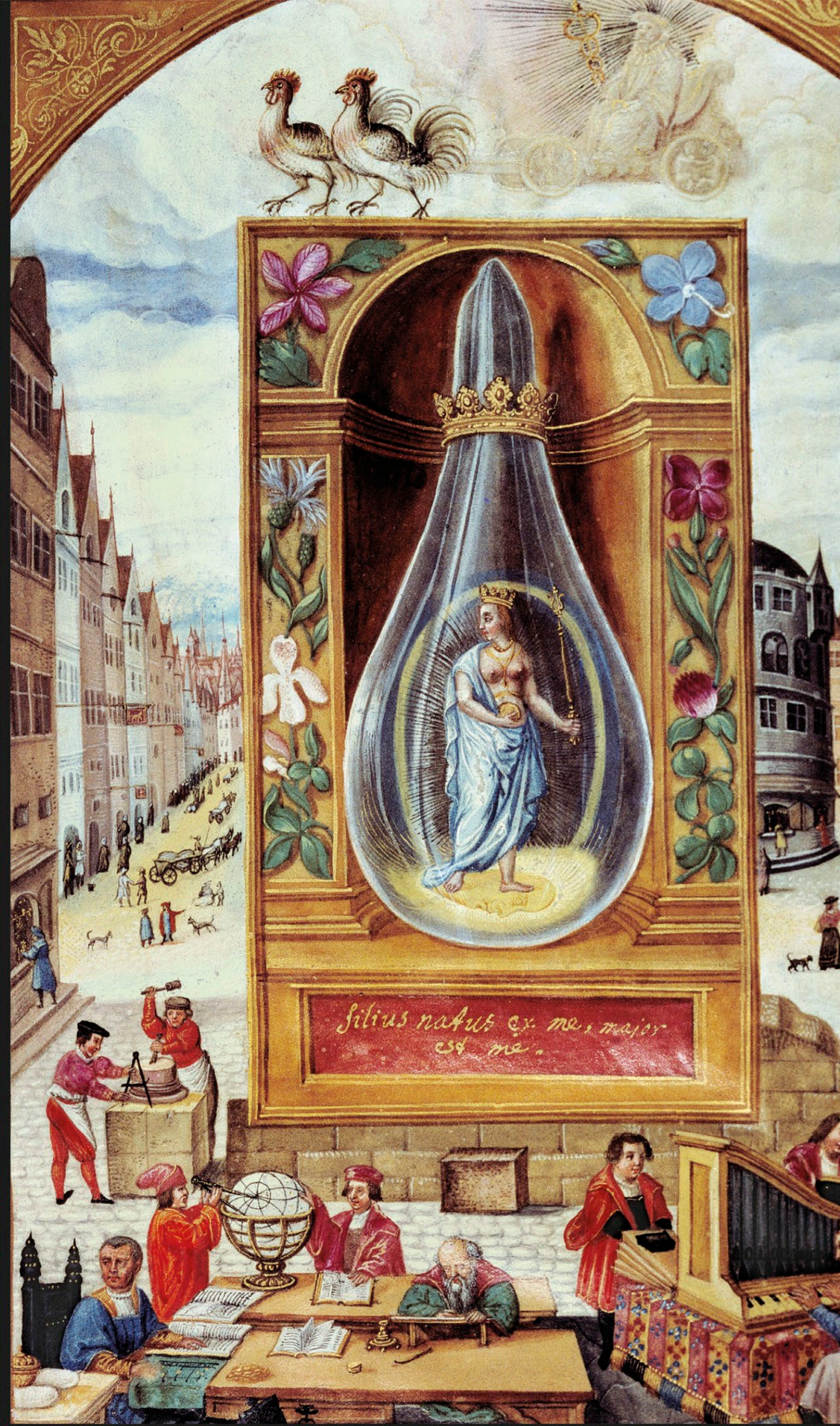
"… by fire, Of sooty coal th' empiric alchymist,
Can turn, or holds it possible to turn,
Metals of drossiest ore to perfect gold …"

JOHN MILTON, *PARADISE LOST*, BOOK V, 1667









▲ **Plates 12–18 of *Splendor solis*** (1500s) were probably created by multiple artists, but their names have not survived.







Alchemy in art

Two major Renaissance preoccupations, art and alchemy, often came together during the period. Alchemy was a gift for artists—a colorful, exciting, magical topic, filled with exotic symbols such as dragons and majestic birds. All kinds of images of alchemy appear in Renaissance paintings, from the scholarly and allegorical to the workaday.

The symbolic, intricate works shown here come from *Splendor solis*, a 16th-century illuminated alchemical manuscript rich with color and gold. The text was believed to be by the famed (but most likely mythical) Renaissance alchemist Salomon Trismosin. The name of the artist—or artists—who painted the images is still a matter of debate.

Splendor solis details the adventures of an alchemist seeking the prized Philosopher's Stone. Recurring numbers, particularly the number seven, were important in alchemy: the images shown here link seven principal astrological deities—seen at the top of each image—with seven major alchemical processes. The cosmic deities depicted are Saturn (top far left), Jupiter (top left), Mars (center left), the Sun (bottom left), Mercury (center), Venus (top right), and the Moon (bottom right). Each flask contains a classic symbol of a stage in the alchemical process: the peacock represents a stage that produces multiple colors, while the white queen (center) and red king (bottom right) stand for aspects that must unite to produce alchemy's goal: perfection.

"Therewith I tinged three metals into fine Gold ..."

SALOMON TRISMOSIN (ATTRIB.), *SPLENDOR SOLIS*, 1500s

SECRETS OF THE ROSE AND CROSS

Rosicrucianism

The secret movement called Rosicrucianism, named after its emblem of a rose upon a cross, first began in the early 1600s. Rosicrucians professed that their followers had access to hidden mystic knowledge and could offer the key to transforming society—claims that made the movement the subject of intense speculation. Rosicrucianism also gave rise to related orders, which have lasted for centuries.



◀ Symbol of the society
The 17th-century, English astrologer and physician Robert Fludd became interested in Rosicrucianism and reproduced its rose-and-cross symbol on the title page of his book of 1629 called *The Highest Good*.

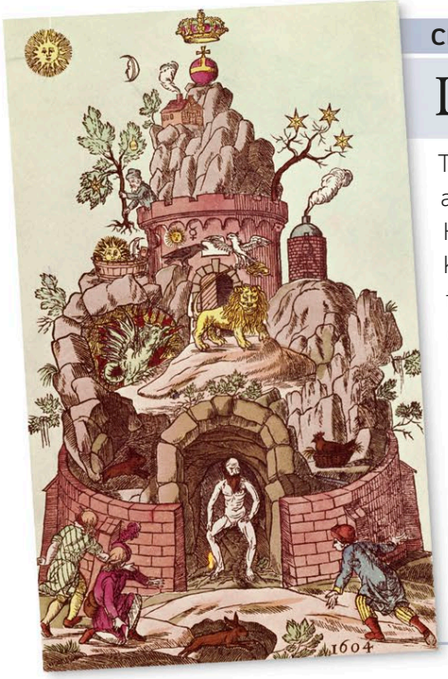
Turmoil and transformation

Many people in Europe turned to millenarianism (the belief in a coming dramatic transformation of society) in the unstable decades that led up to the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War in 1618. Fearful for the future in a continent already ravaged by religious warfare since the Reformation, they seized on the spiritual views of scholars such as German physician and occultist Cornelius Agrippa and Swiss alchemist Paracelsus.

In this tense atmosphere, the appearance of three manifestos published in Germany between 1614 and 1616 caused a furore. The first—the *Fama Fraternitatis der Rosenkreuzer*—claimed to tell the story of German monk Christian Rosenkreuz (whose surname translates as Rosy Cross, see panel, below left) and of the brotherhood he formed. The *Confessio Fraternitatis* and *Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreuz* built on the *Fama*'s tale of a secret magical society, adding references to Kabbalah, hermeneutic (interpretive) writings, alchemy, and other obscure mystical sources in an appeal to those who thought that both ancient and new knowledge could be combined to bring enlightenment to the world.

Brotherhood of man

The Rosicrucian manifestos spoke of a select (male) brethren who had passed the knowledge down the centuries, but no one knew who their author was. Later indications are that at least some of them were written by German theologian Johann Valentin Andreae. He attacked the Rosicrucians in public and dismissed their texts as a hoax, but he did admit in writing to having composed the *Chymical Wedding*. However, this admission was in a work that was not published until 1799, nearly 150 years after Andreae's death.



CHRISTIAN ROSENKREUZ (c. 1378–1484)

Legendary founder

The *Fama* alleged that Christian Rosenkreuz, a German monk, had made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and studied mystic arts and the Kabbalah in Arabia and Morocco. On his return in 1403, Rosenkreuz founded a brotherhood devoted to healing the sick and passing on the mysteries. He was said to have died in 1484, aged 106, and it was the discovery of his tomb in 1604, apparently lit by an ever-burning lamp, that led the Rosicrucians to publicize the manifestos and the society.

Mons philosophorum ("Mountain of Philosophers") was Rosenkreuz's tomb, guarded by a lion.





KEY

1 The East is labeled Oriens.

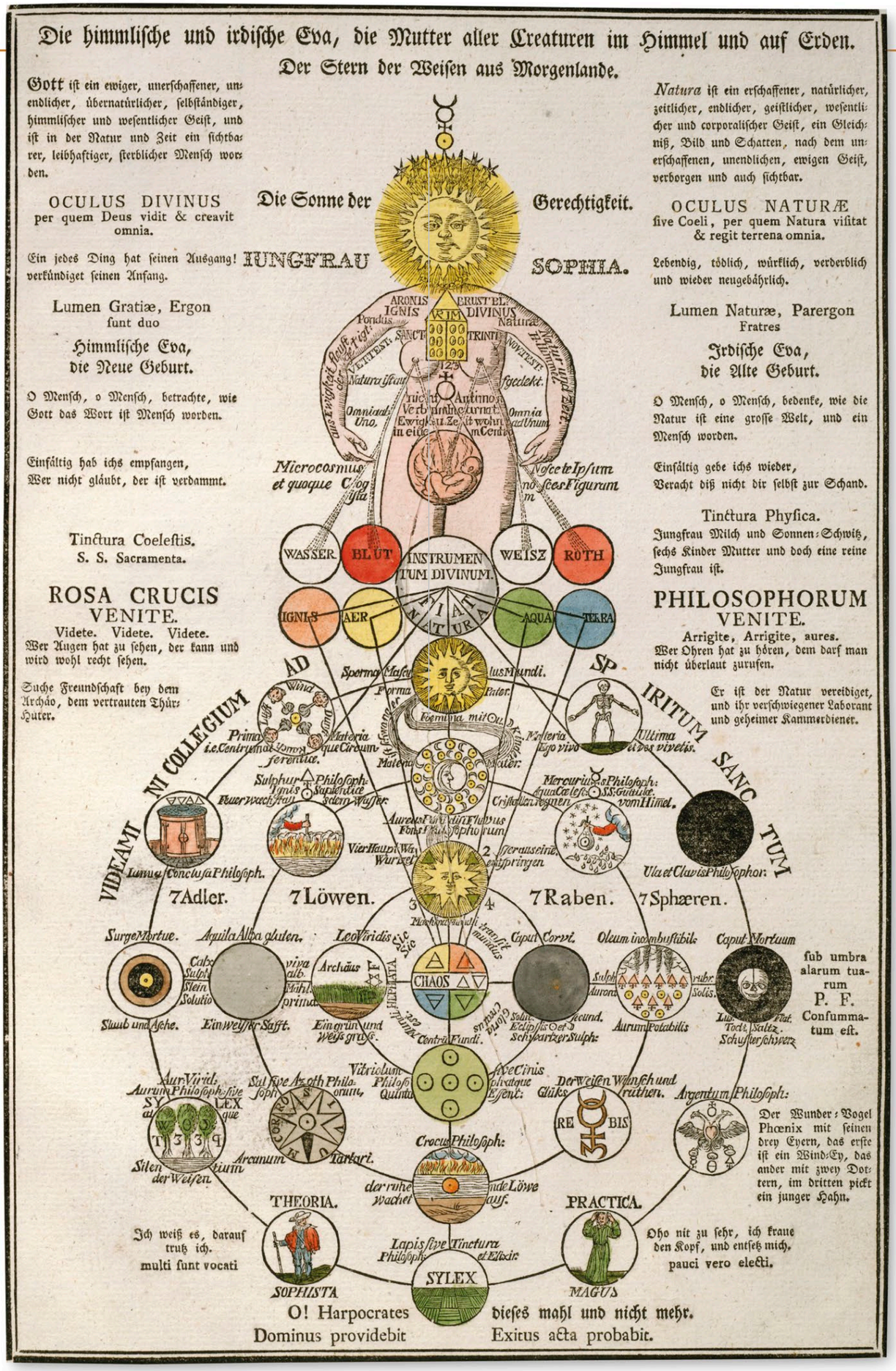
2 Wings help raise the citadel to the heights of wisdom and enlightenment.

3 A man uses levers to help pull the citadel upward and away from the earthly realm.

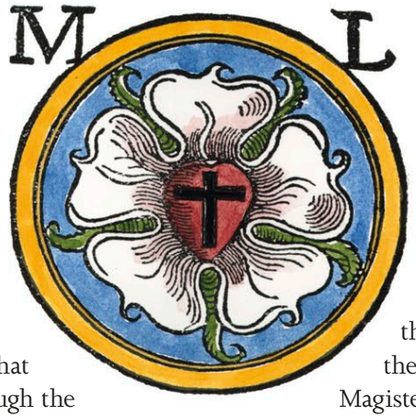
4 The West is labeled Occidens.

◀ Eastern mysteries
This illustration from German alchemist Daniel Mögling's 1618 book *Mirror of the Wisdom of the Rosy Cross* shows wisdom and knowledge emerging from the East to descend on the citadel that belonged to the Rosicrucian order.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding its author, the *Fama* was reprinted seven times in three years, and there had been around 400 publications issued about Rosicrucianism by 1623. In that year, two Rosicrucian posters appeared in Paris stating that the brethren were visiting the city, which led to a storm of speculation as to their whereabouts. Many leading intellectuals held an interest in the order. French mathematician René Descartes, for instance, left Germany for France in search of a Rosicrucian expert. There were continued attempts to track down the elusive Rosicrucians.



▶ **Figure of wisdom**
In this illustration from a Rosicrucian manuscript of 1785, the figure of Sophia (Wisdom) rises up from a dense network of alchemical signs, an indication of how complex the language of Rosicrucian symbols had become.



◀ **Possibility of Lutheran link**
The superficial resemblance of Protestant reformer Martin Luther's seal (with a cross on a rose) to that of the Rosicrucians led some to speculate on a link between the two.

However, as war spread across Europe from 1618, enthusiasm for the order faded: one Rosicrucian tract even maintained that the brethren had moved "to the East."

Rosicrucian occult revival

The optimistic Rosicrucian view that the world could be reformed through the application of arcane knowledge lost much of its appeal in the face of the Enlightenment, which, from the late 17th century, championed the use of modern science to achieve the same goals. Yet, in Germany a belief in the power of alchemy and Kabbalah persisted and in 1710, Samuel Richter, a Protestant pastor from Silesia, published a tract on the "Order of the Golden and Rosy Cross." In it he described a new order, headed by an *Imperator* (Emperor), in which each of the brethren possessed a piece of the Philosopher's Stone, the ultimate objective of alchemy (see pp.148–151).

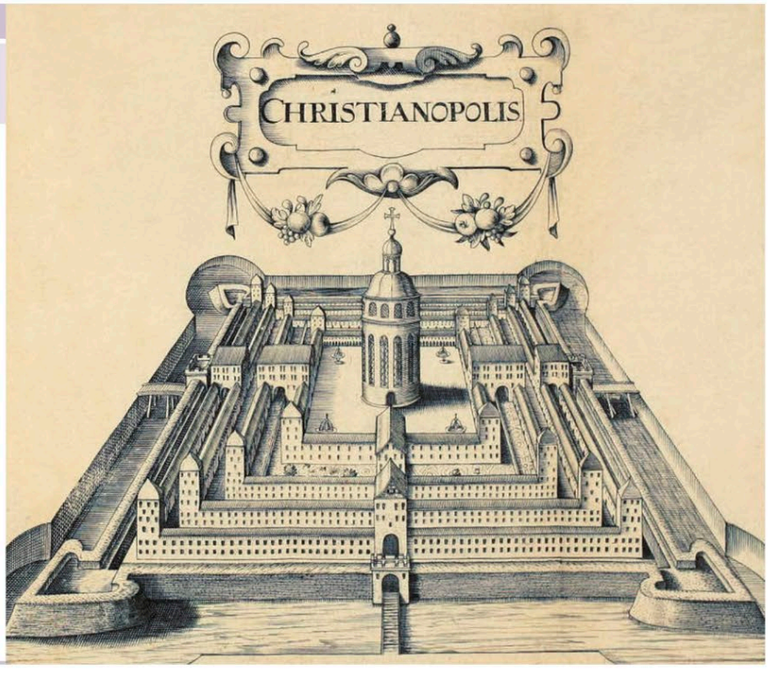
These new Rosicrucians prospered. They became a secret lodge-based order, with a complex belief system and formal ceremonies in which would-be initiates had to answer a catechism of 35 questions in front of senior members seated at a table bearing a seven-branched candlestick. The nine degrees of the order, starting with the Junior, then the Theoreticus, right up to Magister and Magus, each had access to a higher level of Rosicrucian secret knowledge, including how to transmute base matter into gold. For these neo-Rosicrucians, the alchemical change was not literal; rather, it was a symbolic transformation to a more spiritual plane.

Over time Rosicrucianism merged in part with similar secret societies including Freemasonry. It came into conflict with others, such as the Illuminati, which rejected the Rosicrucian devotion to alchemy. The revival of interest in the occult in the 19th century gave the Rosicrucian movement a fresh impetus. New orders were founded, including American branches such as the Rosicrucian Fellowship in Seattle in 1909 and The Ancient and Mystical Order Rosæ Crucis (AMORC) in New York in 1915. Both are still in existence today, admitting both female and male adult members.

IN CONTEXT

Imagining the ideal society

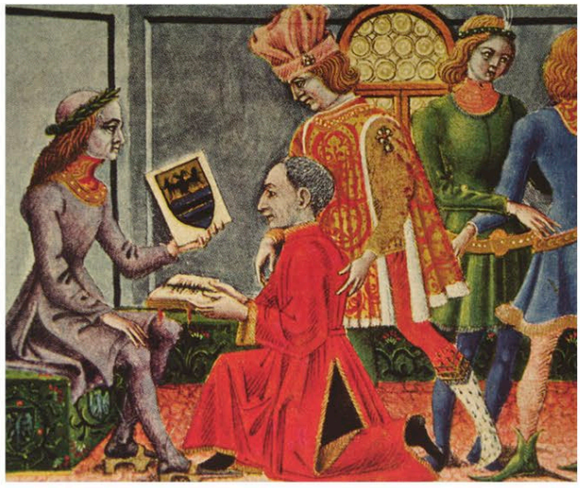
Narrative fictions that portrayed idealized societies became popular after the 1516 publication of English lawyer Thomas More's *Utopia*. Fellow English philosopher Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), for instance, advocated rule by scientific experts. Many on the fringes of Rosicrucianism followed suit; the *Christianopolis* of Rosicrucian author Johann Valentin Andreae envisioned an ideal community on the island of Caphar Salama in the Indian Ocean. His imaginary reformed society was to be based on principles of individual piety, educational reform—the young drilled at boarding schools in mathematics and grammar from the age of six—and improving the inhabitants' lives through scientific research.



Christianopolis: in his 1619 book, Johann Valentin Andreae gave much attention to the ordered and regular architecture of his ideal city.

LOOKING TO THE STARS

Western astrology



▲ **Royal patronage**
The astronomer Giovanni Bianchini (kneeling) presents his *Tabulae Astronomiae* to the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III. First compiled in 1442, his work provided more accurate measurements of the locations of planets and stars than before, which were an invaluable source for astrologers.

Astrology, the belief that movements of the stars and planets influenced human lives and events on earth, had its origins in Babylonia. In Renaissance Europe, translations of ancient texts increased interest in astrology at the same time as a new discipline emerged: astronomy—the scientific study of the universe and of objects in space without reference to humans. The two disciplines were often thought complementary at the time.

The 1st century CE Greco-Roman Ptolemy set out his astrological system, known as the Ptolemaic system, in the *Tetrabiblos*. This system was used by Renaissance astrologers such as Italian Luca Gaurico, who drew on it to publish birth horoscope charts of leading figures in his 1552 work, *Tractatus Astrologicus*. Astrologers benefitted, too, from patrons such as Pope Leo X and Queen Elizabeth I, who enlisted the services of the polymath John Dee to advise on the best date for her coronation.

Rise and fall of astrology

Renaissance astrology influenced other disciplines, too. Humanist Marsilio Ficino argued that the physical and spiritual well-being of humans could be harmonized with the heavenly order in *Liber de Vita*. Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe believed in astrology, too—when he observed a "new star" in 1572 (in reality a supernova) he interpreted it in the light of human events as an omen of war and famine, while astrologers used the increased accuracy of celestial measurements, made newly possible by astronomy, to refine their systems.

By 1647, English astrologer William Lilly, in his *Christian Astrology*, revealed many correspondences linking astral objects to matters on earth; for example, that the planet Jupiter was related to modesty, justice, a clear complexion, cloves, pears, elephants, unicorns, and the number three. For all that, astrology was by then in decline. A papal decree of 1586 banned magical practices and astrology, and 17th-century scientists increasingly rejected anything to do with magic, including reading the stars.

▶ **Merchants guided by the planet Jupiter**
In astrology, planets controlled particular areas of life, and Leonardo Dati's *De Sphaera* (1470) shows Jupiter exerting a benign influence on bakers, grain-sellers, and fishmongers.

IN CONTEXT

New science

The Enlightenment weakened the hold of astrology on science. Sir Isaac Newton (despite being a keen alchemist) formulated the theory of gravity and swung scholarly opinion away from Ptolemaic cosmology (that the earth was stationary and at the center of the universe) to a view of the world based on science. The astrological notion of predictable relationships between the stars and planets and what happened to people on earth was replaced with a belief that the universe operated according to a set of fixed scientific laws.



This illustration is from Peter Apian's 1540 *Astronomicum Caesareum*, a work of Ptolemaic astrology.

"Wisest prince, you are not unfamiliar with how profitable astrology is to men."

GIOVANNI BIANCHINI, *TABULAE ASTRONOMIAE*, 1400s





▲ **Celtic ogham staves** are notched with ogham symbols (early Irish alphabet letters linked by a solid line). There are 26 staves in a set, 25 for the symbols and one blank. Three of the sticks are selected at random from a bag for divination.

▶ **Pendulums** are used for an ancient form of divining called pallomancy. The significance of the direction in which the pendulum swings is predetermined by the user. Typically, the seeker asks a question and the swing of the pendulum indicates a yes or no answer.



▲ **Astrodice** are three dice rolled for divinatory interpretation—one for the zodiac signs (above left); one for the sun, moon, and planets (above right); and one numbered 1–12 for the 12 houses of the zodiac.



Shiny surface is reflective and helps the diviner see visions

A crystal ball is said to reveal secrets or visions of the future to those who know how to "scry" or look into it. Crystal balls have been used for divining for thousands of years and attracted famous practitioners such as Elizabethan alchemist John Dee.



▲ **Merkaba** is a symbol for divine energy: in Hebrew, *mer* means light, *ka* means spirit, and *ba* means body. It takes the shape of an eight-pointed star (two conjoined pyramids). For divination, users swing the star as a pendulum or spin it in a frame.



▲ ***I Ching* cards** are a modern take on the ancient Chinese text of the same name (see pp.52–53). The circled pattern of lines at the bottom left of the card replicates the yarrow sticks that were the original divination tool.



▲ **Rune stones** come in sets of 24, each with a different runic symbol in Old Norse style. The diviner invites the seeker to choose one or more of the stones without looking and then interprets the selection.



▲ **Casting dice** is an ancient method of divination called astragalomancy. The dice were originally knucklebones or other small bones of sheep and goats. The skill lies in interpreting the fall of numbers.



▲ **Spirit boards** (often called Ouija boards) supposedly spell out messages from spirits beyond the grave as the pointer mysteriously moves to different letters. In fact, the pointer is moved subconsciously by the participants.



▲ **Dowsing rods** indicate hidden water or mineral deposits underground as they twitch in response to subconscious movements of the dowser's hand. Originally, dowsers used twigs, but now most favor two L-shaped rods.

▲ **Tea-leaf reading** (tasseography) dates back to the start of tea-drinking but remains popular today. To make a reading, the diviner interprets the pattern of leaves left at the bottom of the cup.

▲ **Scrying mirrors** have an ancient history and are still used as a psychic tool to invoke spirits in the hope that they will offer insight into the past, future, and even events taking place elsewhere in the present.

Divination tools

The process of reading patterns and signs to indicate the future, divination is one of the oldest and most widespread forms of occult practice. Many methods are still popular today, reinvented and reimagined to meet modern needs, especially those of New Age followers. Different cultures have chosen different signs to interpret, and scholars have identified numerous kinds of *mantia* (powers of prophecy)—from abacomancy (divination by dust) to zygomancy (divination by balancing weights).

THE POWER OF PREDICTION

almanacs and calendars

In the 16th and 17th centuries, almanacs were much more common than scholarly books on astrology. Rather like a modern diary, they contained practical information, beginning with church festivals, feast days, and market days, followed by more specific astronomical sections, with times of sunrises and sunsets. Astrological predictions about the weather, crops, and politics followed the practical section. Although their roots stretched back to the omen tablets of 1st-century BCE Babylon, it was only after the invention of printing that almanacs became widespread, as they could then be produced and distributed rapidly and cheaply.

Johannes Gutenberg, the inventor of movable type, published the first printed almanac in 1448. Almanacs spread rapidly through France and Germany, and reached England in the 1490s when the Italian astrologer William Parron produced one. By the early 17th century they had reached the British colonies in North America, with *An Almanac for New England* printed in 1639 in association with Harvard College.



▲ Runic reminder
This 16th-century Norwegian wooden almanac is written in runes, the traditional Norse script. It includes a list of religious holidays, the feast days of saints, and important days for the agricultural calendar, such as the start of winter.

Craze for almanacs

Almanacs had a wide appeal—around a million were sold in England between 1664 and 1666 alone. *The Shepherd's Calendars*, published in France from the late 15th century, were aimed at humble folk, but the allure of their prophetic sections meant that the aristocracy also bought them, and one copy even found its way into the library of the king, François I. Almanacs dealt with higher matters, too, especially with



▶ Agricultural advice
This 16th-century English almanac contains saint's days and predictions about the effect of signs of the zodiac (here Libra and Scorpio) on agriculture and rural life.



IN CONTEXT

Dire forecasts

In 1474, German mathematician and astronomer Johannes Müller published *Ephemerides*, tables of the position of celestial bodies. After his death, it was alleged that a verse prophecy found among his papers foretold calamities for the year 1588. Astrologers linked Müller's predictions with their own fears about a rare conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter that took place in 1583. Despite widespread alarm and speculation, Müller's predicted disasters failed to occur.



Ephemerides is a table of moon phases by Johannes Müller, who was better known as Regiomontanus (King's Mountain).

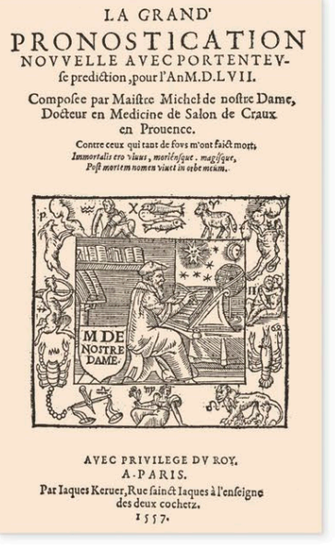
predictions dwelling on the date of the end of the world. They flourished at times of social turmoil, when political tirades could be disguised as astrological predictions. In England, William Lilly's *Merlini Anglicus Ephemeris* found wide circulation during the English Civil War (his first almanac came out mid-war in 1645). Lilly became so famous that he was arrested in 1666 after the Great Fire of London, as he had predicted a conflagration and was suspected of having caused it.

Nostradamus

Even more famous was the French physician and astrologer Michel de Nostredame, or Nostradamus. He began producing an annual almanac in 1550, and his reputation as a prophet soared after he apparently predicted the death of the king, Henri II, in a jousting accident in 1559. His predictions were collated in *The Prophecies*, written in obscure poetic quatrains that mask their meaning. These verses are said by some to have foretold events from the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century to the 9/11 attacks against the US in 2001.

In the 17th century, purely scientific almanacs, with ever more precise astronomical tables, appealed to equally scientific-minded buyers while, at the other end of the market, popular and folk almanacs, such as *Old Moore's Almanac*, continued. First published in 1764, this almanac is still published yearly in the 21st century.

▼ Chronicle of the future
The predictions that come after this title page of Nostradamus's *The Prophecies* still find followers in the present century.



▲ **Tables of magical and cosmological correspondences** appear on this page from the *Magical Calendar* (1620) by Johannes Theodorus de Bry.



The key to all knowledge

Books of magic have a long pedigree, going back to the ancient Mesopotamian omen tablets (see p.19) and the Greek Magical Papyri (see p.32) and continuing through the medieval period. Their existence suggests a desire to make a physical record of arcane knowledge. During the Renaissance, the advent of printing made possible the wider production and dissemination of such knowledge in handbooks of magic, or grimoires (although this term did not come into common use until the 18th century). These varied from grand leather-bound volumes to scrappily bound pamphlets, but the occult knowledge within them lent the books themselves an almost magical quality.

The reputations of the more popular titles were boosted by (largely false) associations with established scholars. For example, the *Heptameron*, attributed to the 13th-century Parisian scholar Peter d'Abano, was actually first published in 1559, while the *Fourth Book of Occult Philosophy* (also published in 1559) was falsely claimed to be the work of the occult philosopher Cornelius Agrippa, who had died 24 years earlier. Most widespread of all was the *Key of Solomon*, which began to circulate in the 14th century. This book contains a hodgepodge of spells and incantations allegedly composed by the biblical King Solomon, and, based on accounts of trials by the Inquisition, it seems to have been especially common in Spain and Italy during the Renaissance.

> "This book deals with … how to evoke spirits … to prolong life by 300 years."

PHILIPP HOMAGIUS, ON A 1617 COPY OF THE *ARBATEL*, 1575

MISUNDERSTANDING THE LOCAL SIGNS

colonial encounters

The influx of Europeans from the late 15th century into areas of the Americas, Africa, and Asia, where indigenous beliefs had previously thrived, led to a clash of cultures. Colonizers often sweepingly called traditional religions magic and their rituals devil worship, and persecuted its practitioners.

The Portuguese in Africa

In 1483, the Portuguese explorer Diogo Cao entered the Kingdom of Kongo, north of modern Angola, and found religious beliefs profoundly unlike Christianity. Cao, and the Christian missionaries who came in his wake, described *nkisi* (see opposite), objects that the Africans believed were inhabited or possessed by spirits, as *feitiço*. Anglicized into "fetish," the term became a general label for African magical artifacts.

Such an oversimplification of a complex religious landscape was a characteristic of European reactions to native spirituality. The Kongo *nganga*, diviner-healers who were said to defend the living against malevolent spirits and cure diseases, were labeled by Europeans as sorcerers, while their practice of harnessing the *bakisi* (spirits) by using *nkisi* led to them being accused of devil worship.



▼ **Herbal cure**
This illustration reproduced from an Aztec physician's 1552 codex shows the *nonochton*, a herbal remedy for heart pains, in which the plants' petals were ground up in water and drunk as a juice. Colonizers were often skeptical of local medicine.

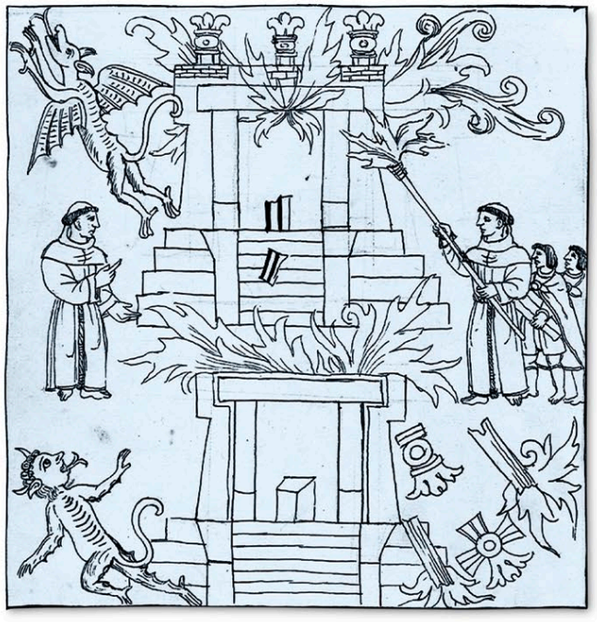
Spanish perspectives

In Central and South America, the Spanish encountered religious systems with state-operated hierarchies and public temples. The Franciscan missionaries who arrived in Mexico in 1524 were horrified to hear of human sacrifice (despite their own Christian notions of the self-sacrifice of God's son): the Mesoamerican peoples believed that the gods had sacrificed themselves to ensure the welfare of humankind and now required a blood offering in return. The Spanish branded such public sacrifice idolatry, and personal belief in divination and spirits *brujería* (witchcraft).

Missionaries were most concerned about native practitioners of magic arts, such as the *nahualli*, shape-shifters who were said to turn themselves into pumas or jaguars, and the *tlahuipochin*, necromancers reputed to have the power to spit fire. Yet despite

"The *nahualli* is … a witch, who frightens people at night and sucks blood from children."

BERNARDINO DE SAHAGUN, *GENERAL HISTORY OF THE THINGS OF NEW SPAIN*, 1545–1590

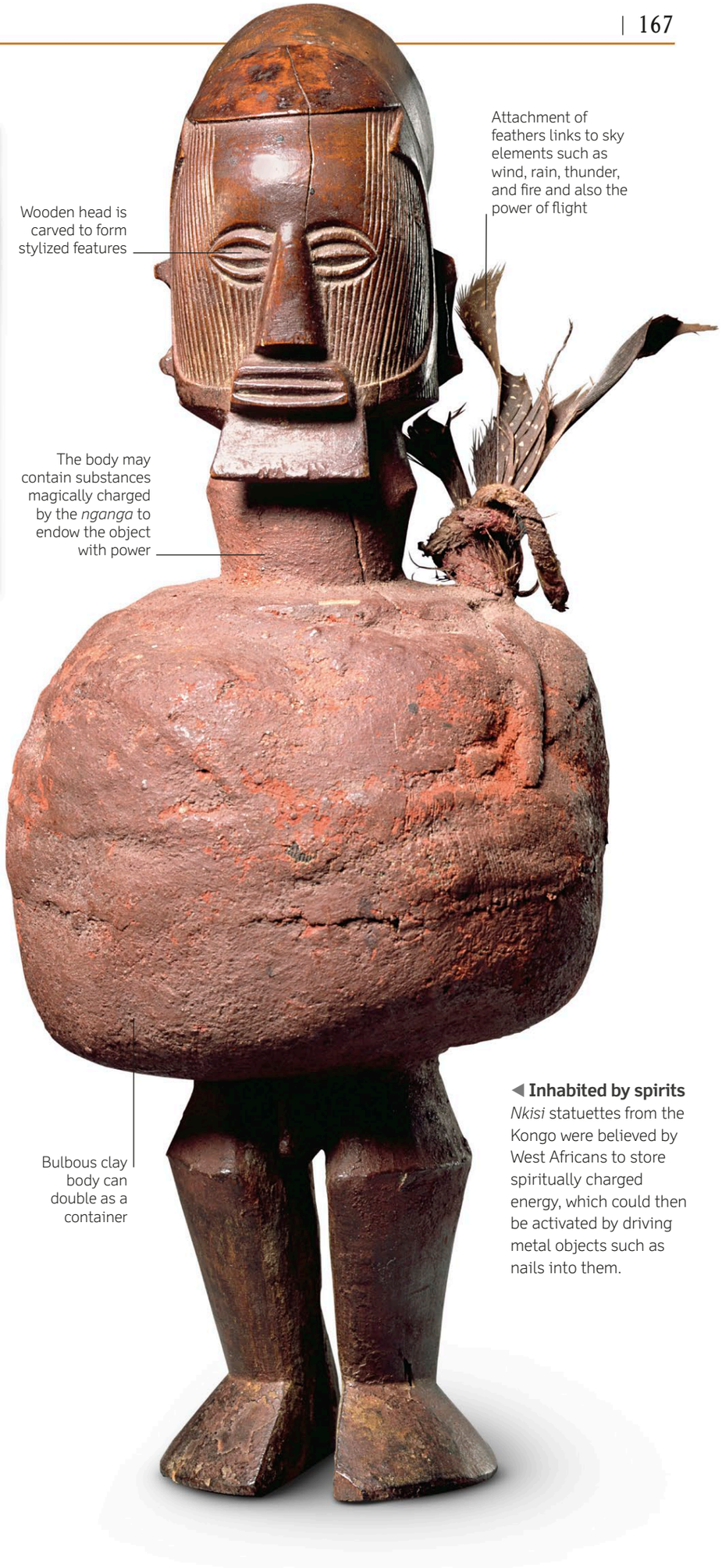


▲ **Fanatical fires**
This illustration from the *Historia de Tlaxcala* shows Spanish friars burning down an Aztec temple. The demonic figures who are depicted fleeing the inferno underline the Spanish view that native temples were centers of devil worship.

violent eruptions of persecution and massacre—Franciscan friar Diego de Landa tortured 158 suspected Mayan magicians to death in 1562, for instance—native religious practices persisted. Local people continued to consult *tonalpouhque* (diviners), who could tell a person's fortune from the date on the 260-day sacred calendar on which they were born; those who used hallucinogens to enter the spirit world; and also *curanderos* (folk healers). In time, saints and their images became mixed with traditional deities and veneration continues in this form today.

Native North American practices

Similar misunderstandings arose in North America. For example, local medicine men and healers were confused with Navajo skin-walkers—men believed to have attained deep spiritual knowledge, which they chose to use for evil by taking on animal forms—by Europeans who indiscriminately labeled all their actions as black magic. The Native American sense of spiritual oneness in the world, in which each creature or plant had its own spirit, was also misconstrued by Europeans who thought locals literally prayed to trees, rocks, and animals.



◀ **Inhabited by spirits**
Nkisi statuettes from the Kongo were believed by West Africans to store spiritually charged energy, which could then be activated by driving metal objects such as nails into them.



▶ Scenes from the New World
This watercolor of an "Indian Conjurer" is by John White, governor of the very first English North American colony at Roanoke, which was established in 1587.

Misunderstandings of local people began immediately: soon after the foundation of Jamestown, the first English colony in Virginia in 1607, its leader John Smith assumed that Powhatan people taking part in a puberty ceremony were sacrificing their own children. Misreadings have continued to this day.



◀ Brutal encounters
This painting portrays a clash between Inuit people and mariners from the English expedition of Martin Frobisher at Bloody Point on Baffin Island in 1577. Violent skirmishes deepened the misunderstanding of native beliefs and led to mutual mistrust.

People of the frozen north

Europeans first came into contact with the Inuit people of Greenland and the Canadian Arctic in the 1500s, when voyagers were sent out to explore the Northwest Passage, a waterway believed to connect the Pacific and the Atlantic. The harsh Inuit environment fostered a need for cooperation and a belief in *Innua* (the spirit powers who controlled their frozen surroundings).

Inuit *angakkuq* (spiritual healers), resembling the shamans of Siberia, mediated with the spirit world and guided their communities in the rites necessary to ensure *Innua* favored them. It was believed to be especially important to appease the Old Woman of the Sea, known in Greenland as *Arnarquagssaq*, who had created the sea creatures, such as seals, on whom the Inuit depended for survival. If angered, the Old Woman was said to keep the sea creatures away from people, causing hunger and hardship.

This world view was not fully understood by Christian missionaries when they began to evangelize the Inuit in the 1890s. Inuit beliefs in creatures of vengeance such as the *tupilaq*, created by a sorcerer from animal parts and even the corpses of children, were seen by these missionaries as a species of witchcraft.

British folk magic

There was some melding of European and local magic. In British colonial North America, some Native American beliefs merged with the religions of enslaved Africans and with English folk magic (see pp.202–203), while the Catholic use of holy water, candles, and relics found a counterpart in the local lore of Puritan New England. For example, Tituba, enslaved by Samuel Parris, the minister in Salem during the 1691–1692 witch trials, was said to have made a cake using urine, an old English folk remedy. In Connecticut, a Native American offered a receptive settler "two things brighter than day … Indian gods," showing that local religion remained vibrant and offered magical solutions to colonizers who were open to them.



▶ Book of charms
This 17th-century book shows a patriarchal cross, designed to protect the reader from violence, illness, and demons. The book and its contents are typical of the mix of religious fervor and magical belief that circulated in colonial New England.

"It was a usual thing for people to cure hurts with spells."

COTTON MATHER, *WONDERS OF THE INVISIBLE WORLD*, 1693

SORCERY ON THE STAGE

magic in Renaissance theater



▲ **Dialogue with the Devil** This 17th-century woodcut comes from an edition of *The Tragicall Historie of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*. Marlowe's salutary tale features a doctor hungry for occult knowledge, who turns necromancer and sells his soul to the Devil.

In Renaissance theater, magic was used to entertain, supply convenient plot devices, and reflect back to the audience an important part of their culture. Playwrights explored how the theater's illusions echoed real life, and whether theater itself was a kind of magic.

Comedy magic

In 1499, *Celestina*, a comic dialogue by Spanish writer Fernando de Rojas, was published. Its pivotal character, Celestina, is a sorceress—topical and risky at a time when the Spanish Inquisition was actively prosecuting perceived sorcery. This work passed muster with the Inquisitors, however, who merely deleted some anti-clerical lines.

The astrologer-necromancer-charlatan figure was a popular stock character in comedy. The magician Ruffo in the 1513 comedy *La Calandria* by Italian Cardinal Bibbiena was a typical example. Illusion and transformation are central both to Ruffo's activities and to the other characters' tangled and humorous misunderstandings.

By the mid-17th century in France, magic was often a marker for tragi-comical and Baroque theater styles, as opposed to classical traditions. In *L'Illusion comique* by Pierre Corneille, the presence of its magician, Alcandre, ties in with the play's clever "play within a play" device and groundbreaking inquiry into the slipperiness of appearances.

Light and dark

In English Renaissance drama, magic was used for comedy, clever invention, and light entertainment, as well as for darker themes. Playwrights often sought to keep on the right side of the reigning monarch, however. Under James I, this meant pandering to his anti-witchcraft fervor. Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, published in 1604, the same year as James's draconian Witchcraft Act, offered a portrayal of the occult that terrified audiences into thinking they saw real devils on the stage.

Shakespeare also partly went along with James I's notions of witchcraft with his stereotyped hags in his play *Macbeth*. But his depiction of sorcery was often subtle, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Tempest*, whose magician, Prospero, may have been modeled on the real-life occultist John Dee.

"Magus, whose studious toil, by night, gives way to a fresh spate of miracles each day."

DORANTE ON ALCANDRE IN CORNEILLE'S *L'ILLUSION COMIQUE*, 1635–1636

IN PRACTICE

In the name of love

Renaissance theater often used a sprinkling of magic or the supernatural when dealing with themes of romance, such as conquering the object of one's love or bringing together star-crossed lovers. This device reflected the fact that popular magic had long been filled with folk spells and potions that could be used to gain one's heart's desire. The flower juice in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (see p.173) was modeled on concoctions made from real-life herbs such as blue vervain.



Blue vervain was used in love potions to rekindle a dying love or woven into bridal wreaths.





KEY

1 The airborne winged figure blows a trumpet to herald Corneille as a master of the twin skills of Tragedy and Comedy.

2 Crowns of laurel, the symbol of Greek god Apollo, show that Corneille is a leader in his field.

3 Figures of Comedy (right) and Tragedy (left) flank the playwright, who uses magic to blend the two in *L'Illusion comique*.

4 Masks are ancient classical symbols of the theater and also help with disguise. In *L'Illusion comique*, magic is entwined with mistaken identities.

◀ Master of illusion
This 1664 engraving for the frontispiece to an edition of Corneille's complete works places the playwright at the center. The works include *L'Illusion comique*, a play that uses magic to summon up its theatrical universe.



▲ **Titania and Bottom** appear in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by J.A. Fitzgerald (famous in his day for his paintings of fairyland), 1800s



Shakespeare's fairy mischief

Magic provided William Shakespeare with an entertaining and thought-provoking way to communicate his ideas. In his romance comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* written in 1595–1596, he uses magic to play with the theme of romantic love (as had many earlier, medieval romances): is it random madness or a type of magic? Is it ruled by otherworldly forces? Do supernatural beings have any more control over love than mortals?

The play parallels two sets of human lovers with Oberon and Titania (king and queen of the fairies) on their bumpy road to happiness. Central roles are played by a sprite known as Puck (architect of mischief) and a magic flower. Squeezed onto sleeping eyelids, the flower's juice makes both humans and fairies fall in love with whomever they see on first waking. Amusing chaos ensues, such as Titania becoming enraptured by a weaver called Bottom (see left), who has had an ass's head magically fixed over his own.

The fairy-filled woodland setting, where much of the action unfolds, may reflect folk and natural magic as well as the inherent wonder of the natural world. The shifting border between good and bad magic is evident in the character of Puck, who treads the line between being harmlessly naughty and slightly demonic. Sprites often had demonic associations in medieval times, and Puck makes such a connection, too, when he refers to the "damned spirits" of the night, in contrast with the fairies of daylight.

"But we are spirits of another sort."

OBERON IN SHAKESPEARE'S *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*


Lucifer.
Sathan.
Eloy

DEMONS AND THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN WITCH

demonology in Renaissance Europe

For educated Europeans in the Renaissance period, demons were central to their ideas about sorcery and witchcraft. Such beings were thought to be wicked spirits able to access occult powers, but only within the limits of the natural world created by God. Demonology (the study of demons) drew on earlier cultures, including Mesopotamian beliefs about demons and evil gods (see pp.18–21), early Islamic *jinn* (see pp.78–81), and ancient Greek guardian spirits (one word for such a spirit was *daimon*). Early Christian thinkers built on these ideas; for example, Augustine asserted that demons existed and that they could enter people's bodies.

◀ Into the jaws of hell
This 16th-century woodcut shows Lucifer and demons at the jaws of hell. Christian tradition held that Lucifer was a fallen angel who became Satan, God's deadly adversary.



Work of the Devil

For Christians, the Devil—also known as Satan, Lucifer, Baal, or Beelzebub—was the prince of demons, who were his helpers. This arch-demon was at the center of Renaissance demonology, a fact that both anchored the study of demons in Christian belief and encouraged charges of heresy against people said to practice demonic magic. In the preface to his *De la démonomanie des sorciers* (1580s), French philosopher and jurist Jean Bodin quoted an earlier text explaining that pacts with demons must be avoided. It states: "… the demon is judged to be an undaunted and implacable adversary of God and man."

Demons were also said to submit to the power of a biblical figure, King Solomon—hence the importance of Solomonic ritual, which invoked holy powers with the aim of gaining control over demons, in ceremonial magic (see p.143).



▲ Exorcising demons
This French engraving from the 17th century depicts St. Catherine exorcising a demon from a woman as other winged demons flee from the scene. The possessed woman's body forms the shape of a crucifix.

Know them by their name

Influenced by Christian hierarchies of angels, occult texts in the Renaissance era often listed the names of demons in order of importance, along with details on ways to summon each of them to perform specific sorcery. Different versions of such classification systems circulated, notably the one in the *Ars Goetia* section of *The Lesser Key of Solomon* (mid-1600s), which listed 72 demons. This Solomonic list is thought to be based on the *Pseudomonarchia daemonum* ("False Monarchy of Demons") that formed part of Dutch physician Johann Weyer's *De praestigiis daemonum* (1563).

◀ Arrows of evil
In *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678–1684), English preacher John Bunyan describes Beelzebub and his devilish helpers as deadly archers, as in this 19th-century illustration of the work.



▲ **Riding high**
The idea of witches riding goats, a symbol of lustful devilry, was a common one. In this image by Albrecht Dürer from the early 1500s, the goat is ridden backward, representing a reversal of the natural order.

> "A 'witch' is one who knowingly tries to accomplish something through diabolical means."
>
> **JEAN BODIN**, *DE LA DEMONOMANIE DES SORCIERS*, 1580s

Agents of the Devil

Renaissance clerics and philosophers often depicted witches as working with demons and the Devil; many produced detailed guides on the nature of witches and how they interacted with demons. Opinions varied: according to some, demons had to be controlled by witches, while for others, demons might well be witches' helpers.

For influential English Puritan cleric William Perkins, being in league with the Devil was part of what defined a witch. To him there was no such thing as a "good" witch, as all witches consorted with the Devil. His key work, *Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft* (1608), did much to introduce such European ideas to England and North America.

Demonic influence

Many books detailed sorcery involving demons, and their authors often used the word *maleficium* to describe malevolent magic. Titles included *Malleus Maleficarum* (1484), by German churchman Heinrich Kramer, and *Compendium maleficarum* (1608), by Italian priest Francesco Maria Guazzo. Both texts contributed to the hounding of witches (see pp.178–181), as did the work of Jean Bodin, who believed in demons, stood hard against sorcery, and took part in persecutions. Dutch physician Johann Weyer in *De praestigiis daemonum* (1563) took an anti-persecution stance, however, that opposed conventional anti-witchcraft dogma. He thought witchery arose from delusion or mental instability.

▶ **Brewing trouble**
This Renaissance-era German woodcut shows two witches cooking up a spell with a snake and a chicken. Witches using fires and cauldrons became stock images during this period.

Coming of the modern witch

The modern European concept of the witch as a woman involved with demons was cemented in the Renaissance, and the majority of witch trials were directed at women. Poor, often single, women were vulnerable to accusations from neighbors seeking supernatural explanations for misfortune. Women were also deemed more susceptible to devilry; Perkins's *Discourse* stated: "the woman, being the weaker sex, is sooner entangled by the Devil's illusions … than the man." Such ideas persisted for centuries, as did the image of the "wicked witch."

▶ **Witches' sabbats**
Flemish artist Frans Francken II's *Witches' Sabbath*, 1606, shows a nighttime sabbat (gathering) of witches. Sensational tales circulated of sabbats involving thousands of witches.







▶ **Derenburg burning**
The 1555 witch trial at Derenburg, Saxony, became one of Germany's most notorious, largely because of this widely disseminated print showing the public burning of three of the four condemned women.

GRUESOME PENALTIES

witch trials

From the 14th to the 18th centuries, around 50,000 people were executed for witchcraft in Europe and North America, some four-fifths of whom were women. The most extreme purges took place in the late 16th and early 17th centuries in Europe.

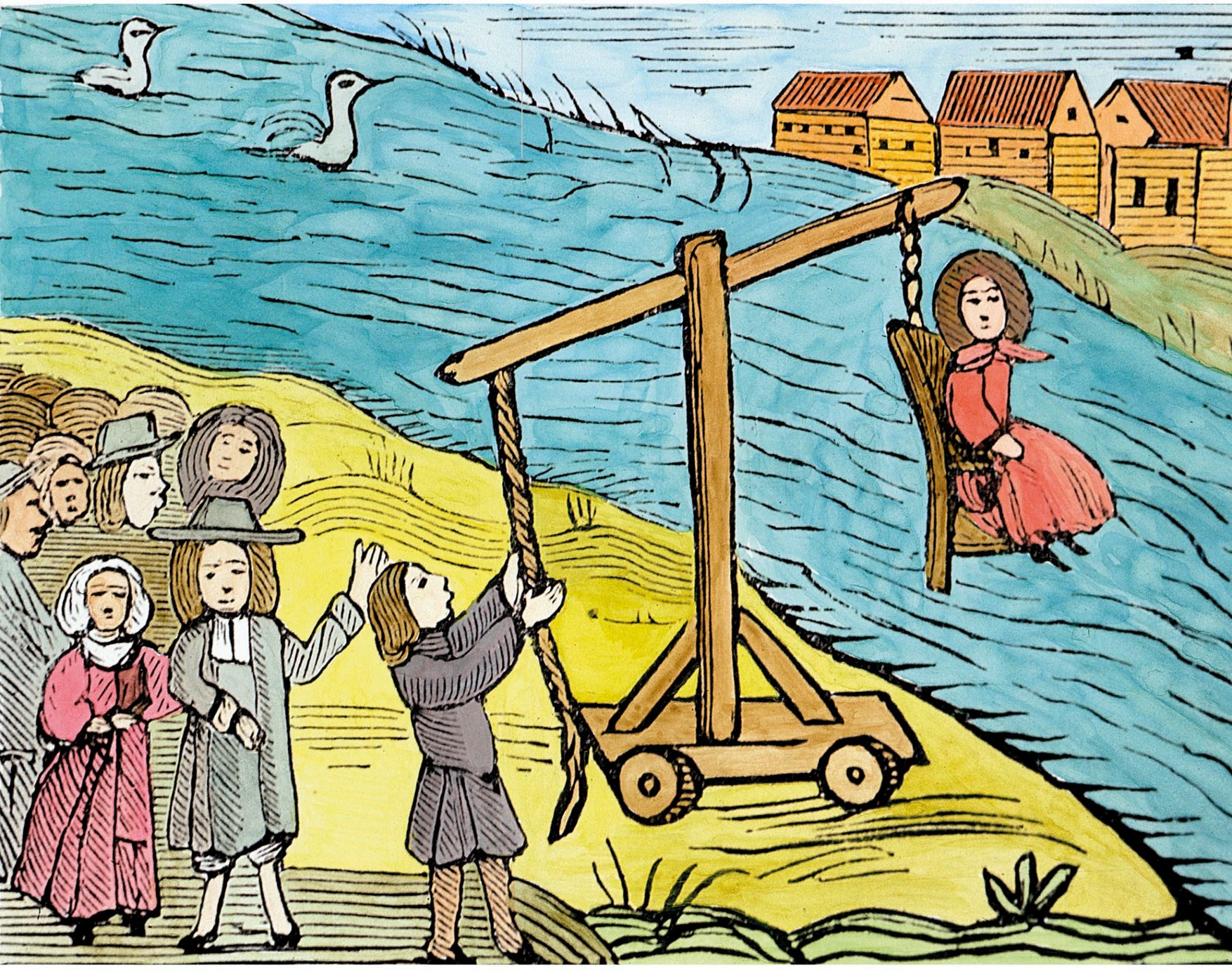
In his final years, 1436–1438, Johannes Nider, a professor of theology, wrote the *Formicarius*, the fifth book of which dealt with witchcraft. He wrote of "A great many witches of both sexes who greatly hated human nature and assumed the likenesses of various kinds of beasts, especially those kinds that devour children," going on to give anecdotal descriptions of child-slaying. This book was later published as part of the *Malleus Maleficarum* ("Hammer of Witches") in 1486, which gave the courts a treatise that they could use to take a harder line in prosecuting witchcraft. As the Protestant Reformation swept through parts of Northern Europe from the 1540s, it gave customs that had until then been tolerated the taint of witchcraft, which further fueled the prosecutors' zeal.



Patterns of persecution

A series of laws were passed against witchcraft from the second half of the 16th century, including Acts in England in 1562 and 1604, and there was a spate of witch trials. In western Germany, the zealous archbishop of Trier set out to purge his small territory of nonconformists, including witches, and he alone accounted for 300 executions in the 1580s and 1590s. Scotland executed at least

◀ **Raising a storm against the king**
This woodcut illustrates the 1590 witch trial in North Berwick, Scotland: Agnes Sampson confessed under torture to using magic to raise a storm to sink James VI's ship as he sailed home with his bride, Anne of Denmark.



200 alleged witches between 1560 and 1660, while England and France each put around 500 to death. There were also significant numbers of cases in Scandinavia, the Netherlands, and Poland, yet in largely Catholic Southern Europe executions for witchcraft were rare. Then, just as the witch trials abated in Europe, the craze spread to the Americas.

Witch trials typically followed a pattern. The interrogation stage often yielded more suspects, as the accused tried to save herself by claiming others had inducted her. As a result, the bulk of trials occurred in clusters, such as the Trier trials (1581–1593), the Pendle trials in Lancashire (1612), and the Torsåker trials in Sweden (1675), during which

▲ Ducking ordeal
The ducking stool was used to identify witches. As water was reputed to repel a witch, an innocent woman would sink (and possibly drown), but a guilty one would float (and survive to be tried).



"They searched her several times for teats; they tried the experiment of casting her into the water; and after this she was excommunicated …"

ROBERT CALEF, *MORE WONDERS OF THE INVISIBLE WORLD*, 1700, ACCOUNT OF A 1693 WITCH TRIAL IN CONNECTICUT

◀ Methods of execution
In England, condemned witches were often hanged rather than burned. This print shows three women who were hanged at Chelmsford in 1589, among them Joan Cunny, condemned on the evidence of her 10-year-old grandchild, while a fourth sits with their familiars—animal companions.

71 individuals were burned to death in a single day. To help extract confessions, some interrogators used the witch's bridle (an instrument with four iron prongs that pressed into the accused's face), gresions (which crushed their toes), or a strappado (a pulley that jerked their body upward, while weights of up to 440 lb/200 kg dragged at their feet).

England's swimming ordeal

In England, a different method of assessing guilt was favored. "Swimming" involved the hurling of the alleged witch, hands and feet bound together, into a body of water—if she (it was usually a woman) sank she was believed innocent; if she floated she was deemed guilty. It was a technique much used by Matthew Hopkins, the Witch-Finder General, England's most notorious witch hunter.

Hopkins toured eastern England from 1642 to 1644 with his retinue, which included a specialist in finding the witch's teat (a third nipple or a bump on the body)—a mark said to be a sure sign of satanic involvement. His group was responsible for the execution of up to 200 witches, almost half the total number put to death in the country over the entire century of witch persecution.

Spain's *auto-da-fé*

Witch trials devastated entire communities. In Spain's Basque country, in 1609, Inquisitor Juan Valle Alvarado was called in to investigate a coven said to operate from a cave at Zugarramurdi. Eventually 40 people were taken to Logroño for questioning, and 29 were found guilty. Five died in prison. The following year, in an *auto-da-fé* (act of faith), a crowd of over 30,000 watched a procession of the 18 accused who had confessed (and so were forgiven) and the six who had not. Dressed in black, these six walked to stakes where they were burned alive.

Male witches in France

Trials were usually of women, but in Normandy those tried as witches were mostly shepherds, believed to have poisoned their victims with toad venom. Their arrest often took place after the theft of communion wafers from churches. The first to be executed were two shepherds in 1577, and around 100 fell victim in total. The last major trial occurred in 1627. Here, as elsewhere, it was largely the poor or marginalized who paid the price for wider society's preoccupation with witches.



▲ Goya's witch
Spanish artist Goya created a series of paintings inspired by the Zugarramurdi witch trials. Here, an accused sits before the Inquisition tribunal, his status denoted by his large pointed hat.

IN CONTEXT

Modern-day witch hunts

Although witch trials petered out in the 17th century, with the last execution in Europe taking place in Switzerland in 1782, witch hunts have continued into modern times in areas where traditional beliefs have persisted and central authority is weak. In parts of Africa, such as Tanzania, tens of thousands of alleged witches have been persecuted, while in Ghana thousands of women live in camps for those accused of witchcraft—often widows or the elderly, seen as a burden at home. Witch hunts have also risen in Papua New Guinea, and in parts of rural India, where accusations of witchcraft can be used as a pretext to settle scores in divided village communities.



Kukuo witch camp in Ghana is an enforced home for women accused of witchcraft, many of them vulnerable widows ostracized by their community.



▲ **Corn husk dolls**, such as this Victorian example copied from Native American ones, were made from the husks of corn cobs and believed to protect the home and livestock.



▲ **African fetishes** were given magical powers by a holy person to protect communities. This Nkondi example has nails hammered into it to bring punishment to a guilty party.



▲ **Ancient Egyptian Imiuts** were fetishes made from stuffed cat or bull skins and mounted on a pole in a pot. They were originally placed near the throne to protect the pharaoh.



▲ **Ghanaian Akua'ba fertility dolls** are carried on the back of women hoping to conceive. The Ashanti make dolls with large disk heads in a stylized ideal of beauty.



▲ **Japanese saga dolls** were good-luck charms. This boy with a dog, made around 1800, has a separately carved nodding head. When the head moves, his tongue sticks out.



▲ **Voodoo dolls** may be used as an effigy of an enemy. The owner can then stick pins in the doll or otherwise mutilate it with the aim of transmitting harm to the enemy.



▲ **Taiwanese figurines** have long been used in China and Taiwan for positive or negative magical ends, from arousing reciprocal feelings of love or desire to avenging grievances.

Poppets and fetishes

Dolls used in magic include poppets—which are effigies made to look like a particular person—and fetishes—objects thought to be inhabited by spirits, which give them powers to protect or punish. The idea is that the practitioner performs actions on the doll, such as sticking in nails or pins to inflict injury, which they wish to happen to the person. Some dolls protect the community rather than targeting an individual.





The doll is dressed in Inuit clothing

▲ **Canadian Inuit dolls** like this bird-headed example were used during rituals by sacred healers to represent spirits and help the healer enter the spiritual realm.



▲ **Modern corn dollies** have revived the craft of straw plaiting. For centuries in Europe, it was believed that harvesting corn made the spirit of the grain homeless, so the last sheath cut was made into a doll for it to inhabit in the winter.



▲ **Witches' effigies** believed to have magical properties were, like Voodoo dolls, made to symbolize an individual. The maker could then use the effigy to influence the person's life.



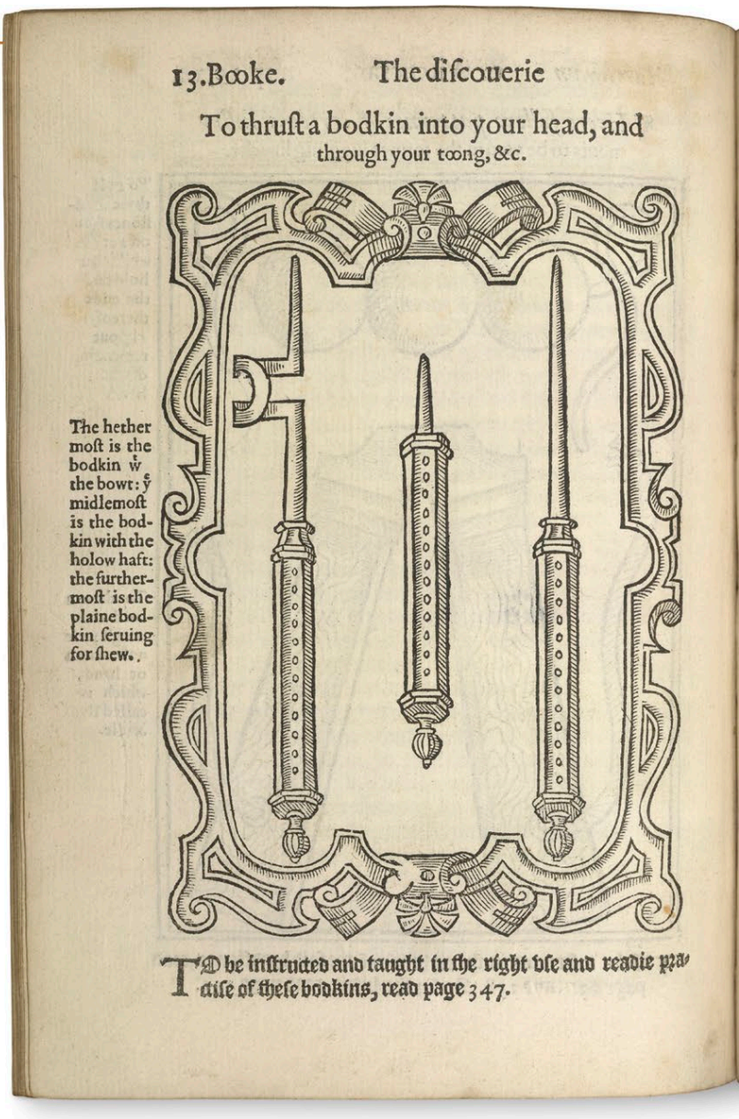
The doll is clothed in a miniature version of a traditional deerskin costume

◀ **Dolls** such as this Sioux example have long been a part of Native American culture, as toys, guides to the spirit world, and to ensure good harvests.

DELUSIONS AND TRICKERY

debunking witchcraft

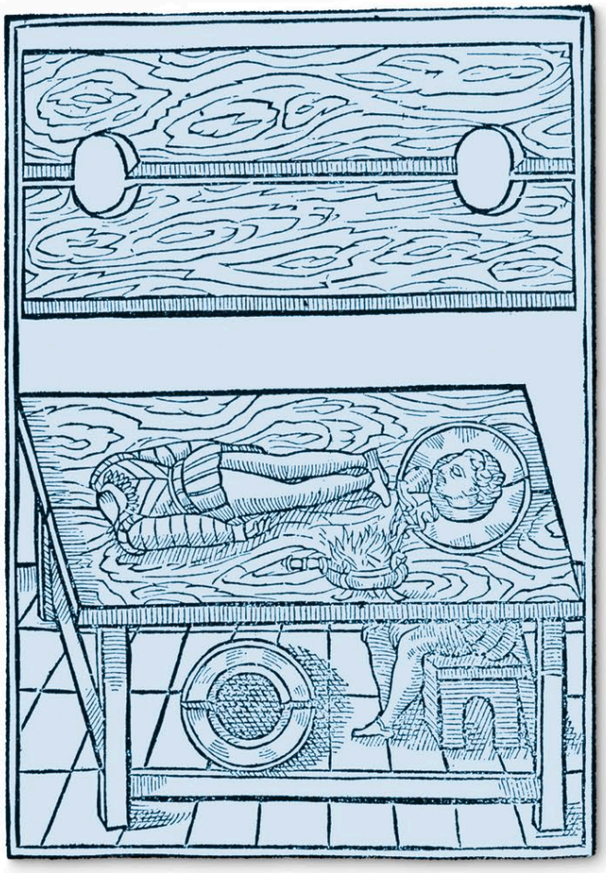
As the Renaissance spread across Europe in the 16th century, the number of skeptics who doubted the existence of witchcraft or criticized the holding of witch trials and the way they were conducted grew. Such voices strengthened, and by the time of the Enlightenment witchcraft was looked on as a type of fraud rather than magic.



▼ **Decapitation trick**
In *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, Reginald Scot explained the "Decollation of John the Baptist," a trick in which a man was apparently beheaded. In fact, there were two people, one of whose heads was positioned so as to appear severed.

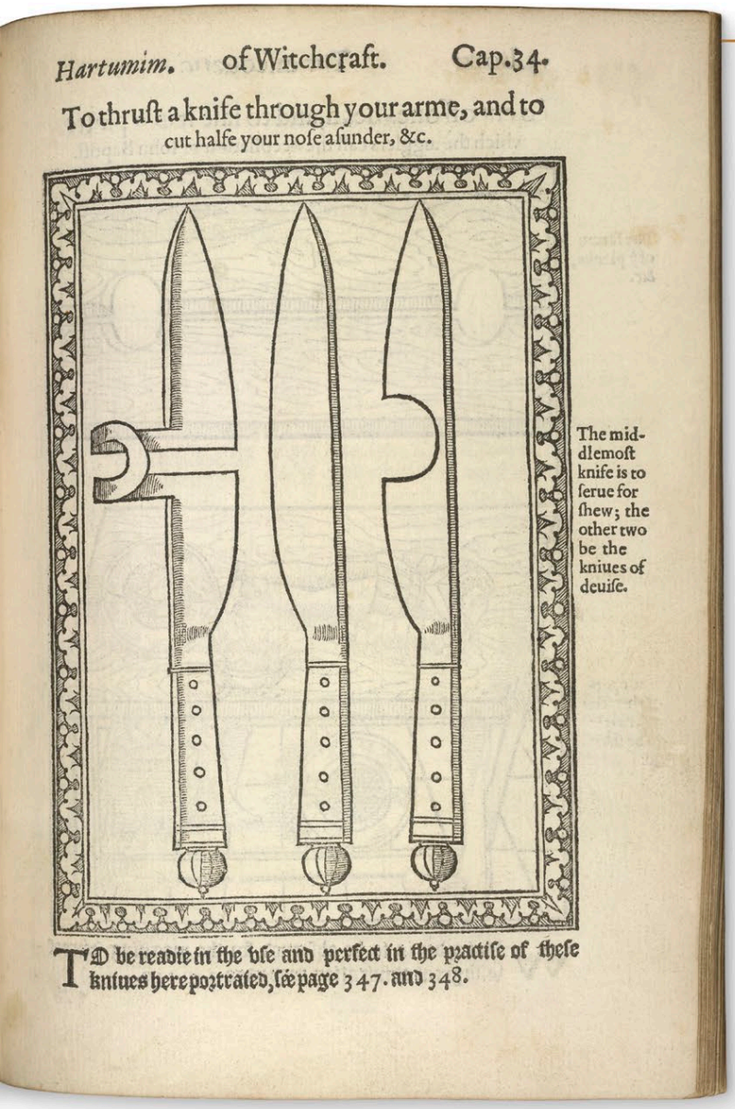
Growing skepticism

There was a tradition of skepticism in the Church and among medieval authors about the existence of witchcraft. In the 16th century, new grounds for disbelief arose, reinforced by the interest of Renaissance scholars in nature and scientific inquiry. In 1520, Italian scholar Pietro Pomponazzi published *On the Causes of Natural Effects*, in which he argued that phenomena traditionally attributed to witchcraft had perfectly explicable scientific causes.



Such skepticism spread, and critics targeted their attacks on the very foundations of the craze for persecuting supposed witches. In 1566, Johann Weyer, a German court physician, published his *De Praestigiis Daemonum* ("On the Tricks of Demons"), in which he made the case that the women accused of witchcraft were senile, victims of jealousy, or, as evidenced by their confessions, suffering from melancholy. Weyer's doubts, however, had their limits: he continued to believe that magic was possible and that male sorcerers could invoke demons. Reginald Scot, an English member of parliament, took the attack on belief in witchcraft a stage further in his *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*

> "Every old woman with a wrinkled face … a hairy lip, a gobbertooth, a squint eye … is not only suspected, but pronounced for a witch."
>
> **JOHN GAULE**, *SELECT CASES OF CONSCIENCE TOUCHING WITCHES*, 1646


Hartumim. of Witchcraft. Cap.34.

To thruſt a knife through your arme, and to cut halfe your noſe aſunder, &c.

The middlemoſt knife is to ſerue for ſhew; the other two be the kniues of deuiſe.

TO be readie in the vſe and perfect in the practiſe of theſe kniues here portrated, ſée page 347. and 348.

◀ Illusions with bodkins and knives
In this illustration from *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, Scot shows how substituting knives for blades with sections removed, or using bodkins with the points removed, can trick the viewer into thinking that a wound has been inflicted.

(1584), in which he cataloged and meticulously debunked a wide range of magical techniques. Most magic, he concluded, was a matter of trickery perpetrated on the gullible, and most witchcraft accusations were directed at poor women ill-equipped to defend themselves. Like Weyer, he believed that many of the accused suffered from delusions.

Critics of the trial process

Other witchcraft disbelievers took firmer aim at the trial process itself, claiming that the procedures used to identify witches were unsound. In Germany, Friedrich Spee's book on witch trials entitled *Cautio criminalis* (1631) denounced the excessive religious zeal and exaggerated procedures that always favored a guilty verdict. Other skeptics cast doubt on the effectiveness of torture, the search for witches' marks, and the water test (see p.181), all of which played a key role in securing evidence for witchcraft convictions.

In the eyes of the law

Although those in favor of witch trials fought back fiercely—including James I of England in his *Daemonologie* (1597)—gradually the weight of opinion turned against the notion that witchcraft was real. In France, a 1682 law of Louis XIV categorized witchcraft as a form of fraud, rather than a question of demonic pacts. Half a century later, the Witchcraft Act of 1736 in Great Britain abolished witchcraft as a crime and replaced it with a lesser offense and punishment: anyone found guilty of the deceit involved in inducing people to believe in fortune-telling or other occult practices was sentenced to a year's imprisonment.

Witch trials continued on a small scale, and witchcraft as a crime was only removed from the statute book in Denmark in 1866. However, the last woman accused of witchcraft who underwent the death penalty in Europe in fact received the sentence for poisoning rather than sorcery or heresy at her trial in 1782.



▼ Witches in history
This woodcut of Macbeth and Banquo meeting three witches on a heath is from *Holinshed's Chronicles*, which Shakespeare drew on for his plays. The artist depicts the characters as lords and ladies rather than stereotyping the witches as ugly hags brewing potions.



▶ Devils in disguise
For witch hunters such as Matthew Hopkins, the presence of small creatures in someone's home might be grounds to accuse the person of witchcraft. Despite the affectionate names recorded for familiars, such as Vinegar Tom or Griezzell Greedigutt, they were believed to be demonic, not real animals.

"Elizabeth desired first of the said cat that she might be rich and have goods …"

REPORTED CONFESSION OF ELIZABETH FRANCIS, CHELMSFORD WITCH TRIAL, 1566

SUPERNATURAL HELPERS

witches' familiars

Spiritual helpers and the divine have long had links to the animal world, from the animal-headed gods of the ancient Egyptians to the *wayob* creature companions of the Maya. As the European witch craze of the 16th and 17th centuries grew in pace, the notion of the witch's familiar arose. Usually small domestic animals such as cats, frogs, and toads (occasionally even human), familiars were reputed to give their human partner supernatural abilities, allowing the witch to see through the creature's eyes or to transform herself into an animal and so gain access to forbidden areas.

Familiars were not necessarily considered to be evil. When attached to cunning folk or good witches, they tended to be viewed as kindly or even as animal embodiments of fairies. However, the common belief was that the Devil took the form of animal familiars, and so their supposed companionship became a key piece of evidence used to prove guilt during witch trials.

Signs of witchcraft

Confessions from British trials suggest that the arrival of the familiar often marked the induction of the witch into the world of evil magic: the animal appeared unbidden or at a time of great need. Witches were said to make a pact with their familiar, guaranteeing its service for a period that might stretch to decades—a variant on the direct pact with Satan that witches were more commonly said to make outside Great Britain. In return, the witch nourished the familiar, and a witch's teat (an extra nipple or lump on the body) was often cited as a sign of evil magic. In the Salem witch trials (see p.189), one of the accused, Sarah Good, was said to have a yellow bird that sucked between her fingers.

Unexpected companions

Familiars were believed to be able to take unusual forms. Old Mother Samuel, hanged for witchcraft in 1593, had a chicken, and there are records in Northern Europe that tell of demonic flies buzzing around witches' heads.

Accusations of possessing familiars were usually directed at the vulnerable but might be pitted at political opponents: Prince Rupert of the Rhine, a royalist in the English Civil War, was said to have a canine familiar, Boy. The dog accompanied him into battle until it died at Marston Moor in 1644.



▲ **Making mischief**
The German legal scholar Ulrich Molitor advocated the killing of witches. In this illustration from his *On Witches and Female Soothsayers* (1489), he shows witches transforming themselves into animals.

IN PRACTICE

Magical cats



The cat Sathan featured in grotesque testimony that helped secure the conviction and execution of Elizabeth Francis.

Cats were the most commonly reported witch's familiar—there was even a medieval legend that the Devil had created them by accident. In the first major Elizabethan witch trial, held at Chelmsford in 1566, the accused, Elizabeth Francis, said she had inherited the familiar, a white spotted cat called Sathan, from her grandmother and later gave it to Agnes "Mother" Waterhouse, her codefendant. Feline familiars continued to be a feature of witchcraft accusations, and in 1662 Scotswoman Isobel Gowdie confessed that the Devil had given her the power to transform herself into a cat.



▲ **One of the accused** confronts the judges at a Salem witch trial in Massachusetts, a scene reimagined in this 19th-century lithograph.



The Salem witch trials

In the conservative, closed-in society of 17th-century New England, accusations of witchcraft were often directed at those not adhering to the teachings of the Puritan church. In 1692, the village of Salem in Massachusetts was isolated and prone to factional disagreements between families. When Betty, the nine-year-old daughter of the new Puritan pastor Samuel Parris, and her cousin Abigail began to experience strange convulsions, suspicions of dark magic arose immediately. The doctor found no physical cause, so magistrates were called in. Under interrogation, Betty and Abigail identified the pastor's slave Tituba and two other women as having caused their affliction. Soon the web of accusations spread, as Tituba confessed that she had consorted with Satan's familiars and signed a "Devil's book," in which the names of other local women appeared.

Other girls began to show symptoms and panic gripped the village. A trial was convened in May but the admission of "spectral evidence"—witness testimony that the spirit of the accused tormented them in a dream or vision—made defense difficult. By October, 19 people had been hanged, including respected members of the community. When accusations of witchcraft touched even Governor Phips's wife, the authorities stepped in. Spectral evidence was excluded from trials and only three more people were condemned, all later reprieved. The Salem witch trials left a lasting scar on the colony, and in 1702 the General Court of Massachusetts declared that they had been unlawful.

"I am as innocent as the child unborn."

BRIDGET BISHOP, EXECUTED FOR WITCHCRAFT AT SALEM, 1692





SECRECY AND CEREMONY

1700–1900

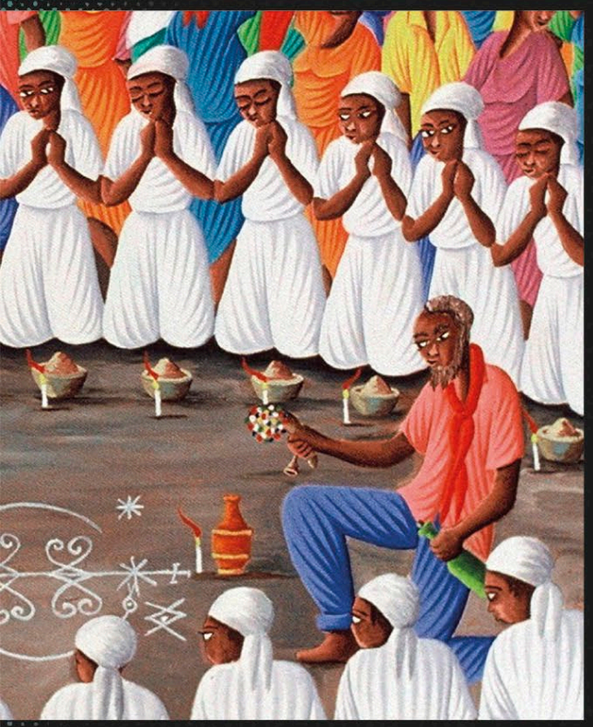
Introduction

By the 1700s, as the Enlightenment gained pace, the persecution of witches was waning. Legislation now stressed the prosecution of occultists for duping people with claims to false powers rather than for being agents of Satan performing mysterious magic. Such skepticism was bound to arise in the Age of Reason that the Enlightenment represented, with its emphasis on scientific inquiry and on organizing strands of thought into specialist disciplines.

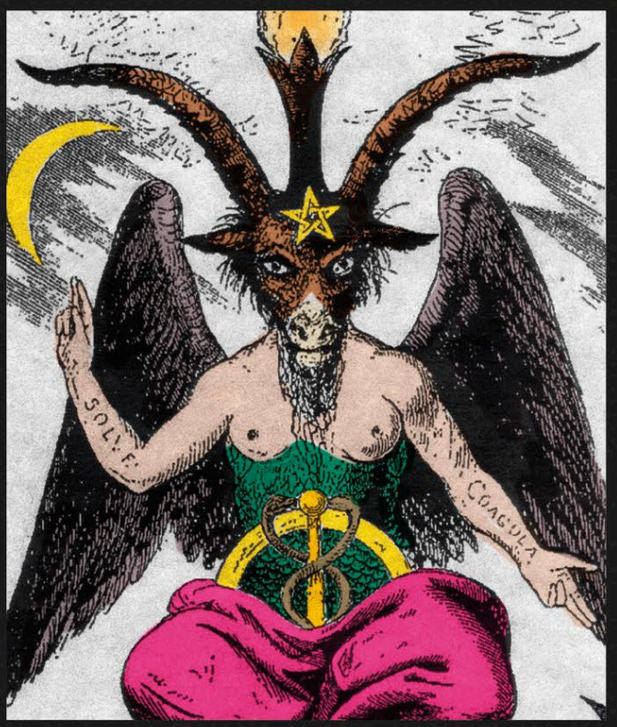
However, no doubt partly as a reaction against the growing rationalization and industrialization at that time, powerful forms of occultism gained a foothold. Events that helped feed this interest included the political revolutions that were overturning old orders, from France (1780s and 1790s) to America (1775–1783). Revolution nurtured an individualistic freedom of creative expression that often veered into the wildly supernatural or macabre—as in the dark Romanticism of writer Edgar Allan Poe. Occult worlds that held fascination in the 1800s and early 1900s included theosophy: building on mystical ideas from the Renaissance, the more modern form of the 19th century—promoted by flamboyant Russian spiritualist Helena Blavatsky—took in Western occultism, the wisdom of Indian religions, and modern science.

Theosophist ideas shared ground with those of the Rosicrucians, themselves linked with Freemasonry. In the 1700s, 1800s, and early 1900s, many secret occult societies, including the 19th-century Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, started up, connected with such traditions, and were steeped in ritual. Ritual was also key to Voodoo, followed in the Caribbean, in which a fertile mix of beliefs centered on the spirits of the dead.

Other seeming countercurrents to order and mechanized progress gathered momentum in the 1800s and brought with them a general craze for magic as spectacle and performance. The most



Voodoo ceremony in Haiti *see p.205*



The goat-headed Devil Baphomet *see p.213*



The Sun tarot card *see p.218*

obvious form was stage magic—professional performances of ingenious tricks, conjuring, and seemingly supernatural illusions that drew packed audiences. Another craze was spiritualism—speaking with the dead. Séances became the fashion, in the parlor as well as on the stage. Celebrity mediums proliferated, as did tales of their ability to conjure ghosts and ectoplasm (the supernatural substance that was supposed to enable spirits to manifest themselves) out of thin air. A similar type of spirit belief was spiritism. In its Western form, developed by Allan Kardec, followers believed in reincarnation. Spiritist thinking also flourished in Latin America and the Caribbean, in forms such as Espiritismo, which blended indigenous and imported beliefs.

Some eminent scientists gave credence to spiritualism, though there were also investigations into its fraudulence. Just as in the Renaissance when people variously viewed alchemists as magicians, experimenters, or charlatans, so many in this period thought that if scientists could produce something as extraordinary as electricity, it was possible that mediums could conjure up ectoplasmic ghosts and allow communication with their lost loved ones.

"The traditions of Esoteric Philosophy must be the right ones … they are the most logical, and reconcile every difficulty."

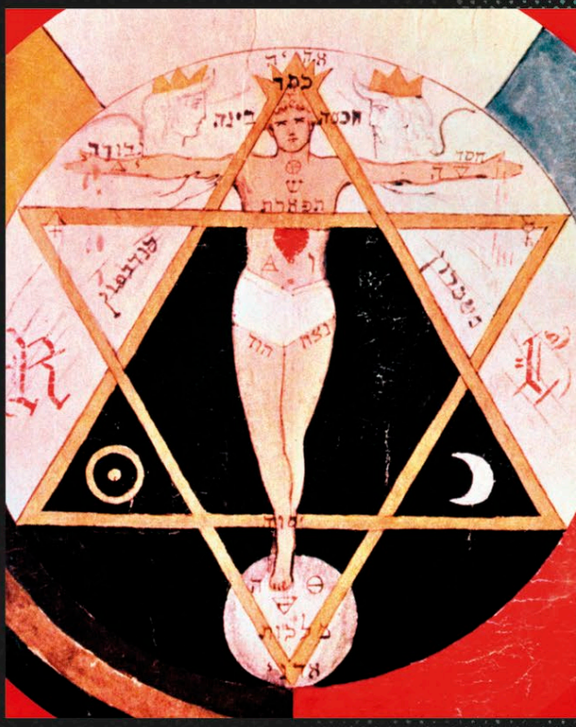
HELENA BLAVATSKY, *THE SECRET DOCTRINE*, 1888



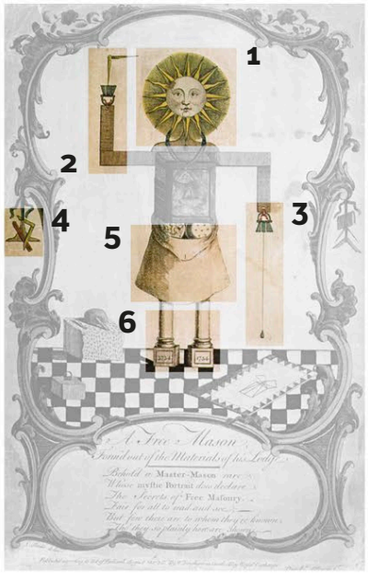
Gothic horror *see p.222*



Séances and table-turning *see p.228*



Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn *see p.243*



KEY

1 The Freemason has a blazing star or sun for his head.

2 His arms are right angles, and his right hand holds a pair of compasses.

3 A plumb line hangs from his other arm.

4 A square—a tool for creating right angles—dangles from the border.

5 A white leather apron, originally to hold the Freemason's toolkit, is tied around his waist.

6 Classical columns form the Freemason's legs.

▶ Tools of the trade
This English image from 1754 shows a stylized Freemason forged through the tools of his trade. The man is enclosed in an exuberant Baroque border that contrasts with the severely linear and monochrome flooring.

THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

Freemasonry and mysticism

Modern Freemasonry was born in England at the end of the 17th century. Its most obvious starting points were medieval Masons, also called Freemasons. They were "free" in two senses of the word—the Masons of the Middle Ages were free men and they were carvers of a form of limestone known as freestone.

Expert knowledge

Masons were the master craftsmen, educated and rigorously trained, responsible for building the great cathedrals and castles of the medieval world. As such, they accumulated a vast store of technical and theoretical knowledge, especially about geometry, which they jealously guarded in tightly knit guilds or craft associations.

Increasingly, Freemasons' knowledge was spiced with mystical learning: Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Kabbalism (see pp.134–139), alchemy (turning base metals into gold), and even necromancy (the conjuring of demons). Secret rituals expressed their love of the occult.

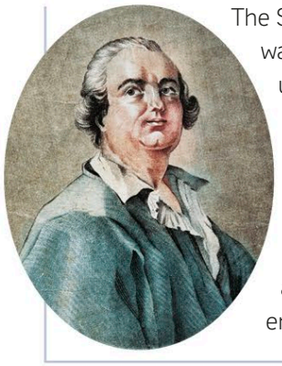
Elaborate rituals

How and why in the later 17th century these original "operative" Freemasons began admitting those who had never been Masons—"accepted" or "speculative" Masons—remains unclear. However, the impact of this fresh generation of Freemasons was dramatic and lasting. These new members significantly raised the social standing of the Freemasons, and they enthusiastically adopted many of the earlier practices. Ceremonies included the three stages or degrees whereby medieval masons were inducted: Entered Apprentice; Fellowcraft; and Master Mason. Elaborate and mysterious rituals went with each stage. They likewise grouped themselves in "lodges," named after the temporary on-site structures from which a Master Mason originally oversaw any project.

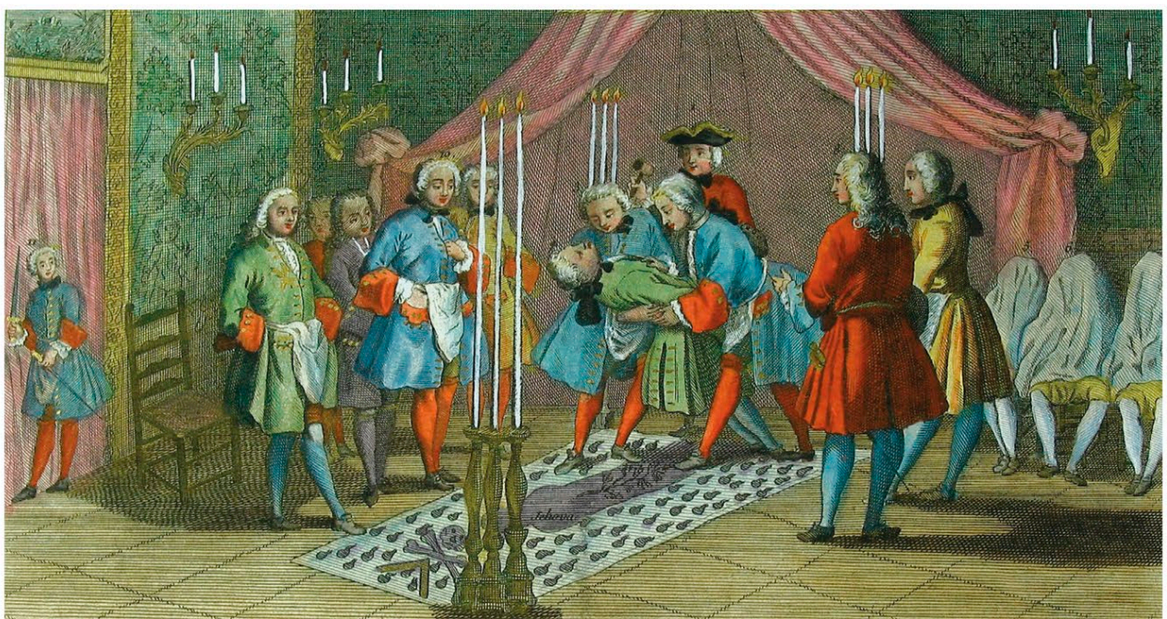
The establishment in London of the United Grand Lodge of England in 1717 cemented the modern movement. The ritual observances of the original Freemasons were at its heart, and the organization was steeped in symbolism based on what were believed to be ancient precedents.

ALESSANDRO DI CAGLIOSTRO (1743–1795)

Self-styled Masonic champion



The Sicilian-born self-styled Count Alessandro di Cagliostro was a shameless charlatan of the 18th century—or an unfairly denounced visionary. Magician, alchemist, seer, and self-publicist, he is credited with establishing, in Italy, the Rite of High Egyptian Freemasonry, indebted to Hermeticism. His goal was the "perfection of mankind," a state attained through the study of Middle Eastern teaching, alchemy, and Freemasonry: the whole a "journey to enlightenment." However, he made many enemies and died, in Rome, a victim of the Inquisition.



◀ Initiation ceremony
In this mid-18th-century French image, the initiate, swooning because he has just been struck by a mallet, is laid down in a designated position. Covered figures, not allowed to watch the secret rite, sit to the right; sword aloft, a member guards the entrance at the left. The whole scene is lit by sets of triple candles.

"Their object was [kabbalistic] magic: occult wisdom … from the beginning of the world, and matured by Christ."

THOMAS DE QUINCEY, ON FREEMASONS IN *SUSPIRIA DE PROFUNDIS*, c. 1824



Universal truths and symbols

Freemasonry draws on a body of semi-mystical, magical teachings and beliefs. It venerates a Supreme Being, the Great Architect of the Universe, but it is not a religion. Like alchemy, Hermeticism, and Rosicrucianism, its concern is the search for a universal truth. Symbolism and ritual are used to unlock the truth. The most important symbol of all is the Temple of Solomon, built in Jerusalem in c. 960 BCE, because its architect, Hiram Abiff, was deemed to be the first Mason.

Freemasons pay homage to the All-Seeing Eye of God and the Blazing Star, variously claimed as the sun, Venus, or the Star of Bethlehem. The mystagogue, Hermes Trismegistus (see pp.134–135), who is said to have kept intact the secrets of geometry, is also revered. The tools of the medieval Masons—the square, compass, and apron—pay tribute to their exacting geometrical demands and are consistent symbols of Freemasonry.

Legendary past

Freemasons liked to construct their own traditions to give gravitas to their movement. For example, they claimed that the 10th-century Anglo-Saxon king, Athelstan, introduced the biblical teachings of Moses and Noah, and of Euclid, the 4th-century BCE "father of geometry," to England, and that the Knights Templar (12th-century Crusaders; see pp.118–119) were champions of Freemasonry. This mix of invention and secrecy contributed to a quasi-mystical aura—for those initiated into the highest orders, contemplation of the truth was said to produce a transcendent wonder.

◀ Masonic tracing board
Tracing boards showed what the emblems and symbols of Freemasonry looked like, and were used to instruct new members in each degree of initiation. This stylized representation from 1819 of Solomon's Temple under the All-Seeing Eye of God is flanked by the Two Pillars, Jachin and Boaz, which stood at the entrance.



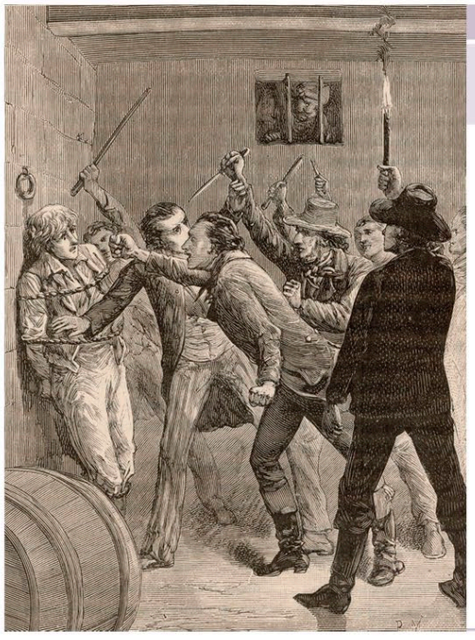
▶ **Painted white leather apron**
The Freemasons adopted the apron, an echo of the pouch in which a medieval Mason kept his tools. As here, it often shows emblems such as the square (right-angled tool, seen at bottom left) and compasses used by architects.

Secret brotherhood

Every lodge and every arm of Freemasonry is independent—there is no higher coordinating body. Together with its strands from the past, this flexibility helps explain its appeal. Largely a product of the English-speaking world, the first Masonic lodge in America was begun in 1730, and Benjamin Franklin was a founding member.

Today there are Freemasons across much of Europe, particularly in France, as well as in many parts of Latin America. The public focus of the Masons in the UK and US is on good works, but in Latin America an "occult-esoteric" bias is clear, which emphasizes alchemy and its power to transform, though spiritually rather than physically.

Freemasonry has always invited suspicion, particularly from critics who view it as a closed world of shadowy influence bent on the creation of a New World Order. It has much in common with another secret brotherhood, the late 18th-century Illuminati, which also searched for universal truth. Other critics claim that its stress on "brotherhood, relief [charity], and truth" are mere distractions from the promotion of the interests of its overwhelmingly white male members (nearly all lodges exlude women). Nor has Freemasonry spread to the Islamic world, where it is illegal in most regions. Yet it remains a modern-day survival of supposedly ancient lore and custom, with mysticism and private rituals at its heart.



IN CONTEXT

Scandal and outrage

The disappearance of journalist William Morgan in New York in 1826 was taken as clear evidence of the sinister potency of Freemasonry. A one-time member himself, he was presumed to have been murdered by the Freemasons for having revealed their secrets. No proof of his death at the hands of Freemasons was ever found but lack of evidence only increased a fevered speculation. Many assumed the Freemasons were guilty. Morgan's disappearance provoked a rapid anti-Masonic reaction in the US that sent the movement into decline until a sudden revival in the Civil War (1861–1865) thanks to testimony of Freemasons' compassionate acts.

According to this 1826 engraving, Freemasons murdered Morgan for revealing secrets he had learned when he was a member.



▲ Wise woman
This early 19th-century Swedish print of an ancient, hunched "wise woman" consulted by a fashionable young woman underlines the increasing appeal that "cunning folk" held to members of high society.

SCIENCE OR SPELLS?

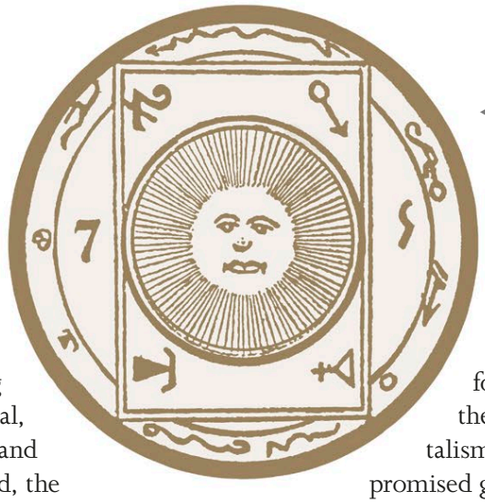
folk magic in Europe

With the spread of Enlightenment beliefs in reason and the growth of scientific method, 18th-century attitudes to witchcraft underwent a decisive shift. In essence, magic of whatever variety plainly did not exist in an Enlightened world, so it followed that neither could witches. This attitude was in stark contrast to the emotionally charged frenzy and suspicion that had led to waves of witch trials in the 16th and 17th centuries (see pp.178–181).

In Britain, for example, under the Witchcraft Act of 1735, anyone claiming supernatural powers, benign or malevolent, was self-evidently a fraud and prosecuted as such. Furthermore, the death sentence was abolished for those found guilty, and was replaced by prison and/or a fine. Before the Act, the last person executed for witchcraft in Britain was a Scotswoman, Janet Horne, in 1727.

Healing folk

One consequence of this newly rational attitude was that in many parts of Europe, practitioners of folk medicine—"cunning folk"—found themselves under investigation for a variety of superstitious practices. But cunning folk were for the most part healers rather than practitioners of the dark arts, however much ancient lore they laid claim to.



◀ ***Poule Noire* talisman**
The spell book *La Poule Noire* describes 22 silk talismans and bronze rings. A Turkish sage was said to have revealed their secrets to a Napoleonic soldier. This one, Number 10, "will make you invisible to all eyes."

As healers they were greatly valued, especially in remote areas with no access to other medical care. In their common role of midwives, cunning folk blended mystical spells, herbal remedies, and practical help. In fact, the more that cunning folk aroused official disapproval, particularly from the church, and the more they were prosecuted, the greater their fame. A handful had national reputations, and it even became the fashion in society circles to consult cunning folk.

Acceptance and celebration

Much of the cunning folks' ancient knowledge, particularly in Scandinavia, was held in "black books" and collections of magic spells, later called grimoires. Some spell books contained no more than simple remedies for various ailments, from toothache to back pains, while others promised dizzying powers. *La Poule Noire* ("The Black Pullet"), for example, was a guide to the construction of magical talismanic rings. These rings promised great powers, the most extraordinary of which was the ability to create the Black Pullet—a hen that laid golden eggs. Any individual achieving this power was said to have access to unlimited wealth.

Spell books such as *La Poule Noire* exerted a growing influence well into the 19th century, particularly in France, sparked in part by the growing scholarly interest in folklore and legend. Indeed, gaining possession of a lucrative power is a theme in many fairy tales and magical stories that have remained popular into the 20th and 21st centuries.

> "Each community had its specialists … and people had great faith in them."
>
> **ANNE MARIE DJUPDALEN** ON 19TH-CENTURY NORWEGIAN FOLK HEALERS



▲ **Herbal remedy**
Valeriana officinalis, a relaxant and cure for insomnia, was among the cunning folks' most favored herbal remedies. Valerian was also frequently hung in barns, as people believed that its pungency guarded animals from malign spirits.



MOR SAETHER (1793–1851)

Miracle woman

Of all the cunning folk, none was more celebrated, almost venerated, than the Norwegian "miracle woman" Mor (Mother) Saether. Her desire to heal amounted to a kind of vocation, one augmented by an instinctive and wide-ranging understanding of herbal medicines. She was imprisoned for quackery three times—in 1836, 1841, and 1844. In the end, the public outcry against her incarceration was such that the Norwegian Supreme Court freed her. Among her most famous patients was the patriot and poet Henrik Wergeland. Her rheumatic salve was still being sold into the 1980s.



▲ **The witch meets Hansel and Gretel** in Arthur Rackham's 1909 illustration for "Hansel and Gretel," from *Grimm's Fairy Tales.*



Fairy tales

By the 1800s, the fairy tale had become a prominent fixture in European culture for both children and adults. Magic was a major ingredient and some tales had a dark, strange occultism, too. Fairies, witches, transformative characters, spells, curses, and potions abounded. Many fairy tales were extensions of existing traditions of magical folklore, such as *Fortunatus*, a story about a purse that magically refills, which was circulating by the 1700s.

Magical tales, such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, with its enchanted potions and a deck of cards that come to life, thrived in an age influenced by Romanticism and its stress on freedom of the imagination. They offered an escape from the grimy reality of the Industrial Revolution and reflected the Victorian love of fairy tale art, part of a wider celebration in fiction of childhood innocence.

German fantasy writing was a huge influence, often derived from national folk history. The Brothers Grimm, leading folklore collectors, retold tales such as "Hansel and Gretel" and "Rumpelstiltskin," which respectively featured a witch and the magic art of spinning straw into gold. First published in 1812, these collected fairy tales became known as *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and were famously illustrated by Arthur Rackham in the 1900s. Other magical tales popular between the 1700s and early 1900s include the Middle Eastern *One Thousand and One Nights* and American author L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, with good and evil witches, winged monkeys, and magic shoes.

"But the old woman was a wicked witch who was lying in wait there for children."

"HANSEL AND GRETEL," FROM *GRIMM'S FAIRY TALES*

BURIED CHARMS AND BORROWED SIGNS

folk magic in North America



▲ Sator Square amulet
This early Christian magical tool called the Sator Square shows words that are readable backward or forward. In his book on pow-wows, Johann George Hohman stated that the Sator Square possessed properties that could extinguish fires as readily as protect cows from witches.

From the late 17th century, as wave upon wave of people arrived in North America, folk magic spread across the continent. Magical practices took three different forms: the activities of the cunning folk among English settlers; a variant, practiced by those known as "conjurers," among African Americans; and a Germanic folk magic practiced by the people known as the Pennsylvania Dutch.

As in England, the cunning folk in North America were generally benevolent in their intentions—their concern was the well-being of their fellow settlers. To this end, they used a mixture of spells, herbal remedies, and various prized objects—amulets and written charms in particular, many buried for extra potency—to bring good fortune and to ward off evil.

From cunning folk to conjurers

If not explicitly Christian, cunning folk still evoked the name of Christ for protection. There remained a popular, superstitious belief in the malign that needed to be guarded against, and not just among the freeborn English settlers. The cunning folk were mirrored by those among the African American population similarly thought to possess magical gifts. They, too, believed in burying objects charged with magical significance. At Ferry Farm, George Washington's Virginia childhood home, in an example of ritual placement, oysters were embedded in the foundations in the hope of safeguarding the house and its inhabitants.

However, there was a crucial distinction between conjurers and cunning folk: the former were enslaved people who, like hundreds of thousands of others, had been forcibly transported to the New World. The conjurers' role in helping their enslaved brothers and sisters acquired a poignant urgency.



▶ Miracles and magical symbols
This illustration from the 18th-century *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* of a man with a sword contains magical Israelite symbols. An inspiration for Hohman's book *Pow-Wows*, the *Books* were a part-magical, part-religious confection of Hebrew, Roman, and Christian sources and related how, among other biblical miracles, Moses turned his staff into a snake and conjured a pillar of fire.



▶ **Star image on barn**
The Pennsylvania Dutch painted vividly exact stars on their barns, probably as stylized images of the unchanging heavens.

Pennsylvania Dutch

From the early 18th century, the German-speaking settlers of Pennsylvania made their mark on their new home, and it mainly took the literal form of boldly painted stars. These star motifs appeared on buildings such as barns and on almost every object they produced, from quilts to butter dishes.

Although some have claimed that the stars are hex signs against malignant forces, the real explanation for their use is both more prosaic and more universal. The Pennsylvania Dutch were farmers, acutely aware of the passing seasons. There was no more obvious symbol of natural cycles than the celestial order, evidence of a vast cosmos that dwarfed all human efforts.

Pow-wows

The publication in 1820 of German healer and mystic Johann George Hohman's *Pow-Wows; or, Long-Lost Friend* introduced a new magical variant. The book was an exuberant rehashing of earlier texts, which he had shamelessly plagiarized. It was part practical advice—cures for rheumatism, how to brew beer, how to treat a sick cow—and part mystical posturing. Mere possession of the volume, Hohman asserted, would protect the holder.

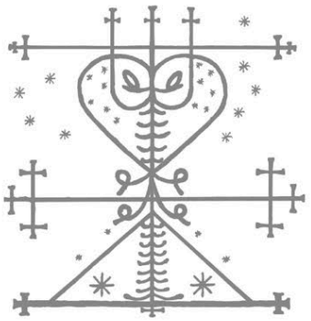
The book also introduced the term "pow-wow" for this semi-magical condition, and its advocates were known as pow-wowers. The name was possibly a corruption of a local term used by the indigenous Narragansett people for a spiritual gathering. Or it might have been a doctored version of the word "power."

"Wild-fire and the dragon, flew over a wagon,
The wild-fire abated and the dragon skated."

JOHANN GEORGE HOHMAN, *POW-WOWS; OR, LONG-LOST FRIEND*, 1820

EVERYTHING IS SPIRIT

Voodoo and Hoodoo



◀ ***Veve***
A Voudon ritual starts with the drawing of a symbol, known as a *veve*, on the ground with scattered corn starch. Animal sacrifice follows, both elements critical in summoning a *lwa* (spirit). The origins are lost, but *veves* are claimed to represent astral forces.

Although Voodoo—more accurately called Voudon, which translates as spirit—and Hoodoo are related, their differences are significant. Both are African in origin, carried by slaves across the Atlantic in the 18th century to France's Caribbean colonies and territories along the Mississippi. Both were also altered by influences in their new surroundings, Voudon by Catholicism, and Hoodoo by other faith systems, European as well as Native American. Yet the key fact remains: that Voudon is a religion, while Hoodoo is a form of folk magic.

Origins of Voudon in Haiti

From its roots in the Fon religion of West Africa, Voudon evolved in the Caribbean on the island of Saint Domingue (modern Haiti). This was France's richest colony, exporting coffee and sugar produced by enslaved people. Slavery was the defining feature of Voudon. More than a million West Africans were transported to the island, where they were subject to France's Code Noir, which outlawed all religions except Catholicism and insisted that the enslaved should become Catholic.

Mystical world

The result was a remarkable hybrid—a mingling of beliefs, practices, and world views known as syncretic religion—that fused the original spirit and ancestor worship of the enslaved with Catholicism. Although Voudon followers believe in an overarching god, the creator of all things, called Bondye (a corruption of the French *Bon Dieu* or Good God), he is too remote to be directly worshipped and there is no single liturgy. Instead, god is worshipped through thousands of spirits known as *lwa* or *loa*, who represent every aspect of the world and of humanity. It is in these spirits that the deeply mystical nature of Voudon truly reveals itself.

Possession and revelation

Voudon followers believe in two worlds: visible and invisible; the domains of the living and the dead. The spirits of the dead are always among the living, but they can only be made manifest



▶ **Voudon doll**
As symbols of a bounteous world, Voudon dolls—this one a female figure with an animal head—are central to the exuberant celebration of nature. They proclaim a delight in the real world and fecundity.



"… [sprinkle cow manure scorched] with red pepper and white people's hair … in my master's bedroom to stop him abusing me."

NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF HENRY BIBB, AN AMERICAN SLAVE, 1849



by the *lwa*. Voudon rituals involve the active participation of everyone present. The goal of a Voudon ceremony, presided over by an *Ougan* (priest) or a *Mambo* (priestess), is to summon these spirits, by means of animal sacrifices and *veve* symbols drawn in corn starch, until one or more of the worshippers is possessed by a *lwa*. This is not possession in a diabolic sense: it is a positive affirmation of the vital links between the living and the dead, between the material and the spiritual worlds. For all that, in the infinitely various world of Voudon, there can be a darker aspect. As well as priest figures, there are sorcerers, known as *Bokor* if male, *Caplata* if female, who call forth more malevolent spirits and summon the living dead—zombies. Such mythical figures can be thought of as a metaphor for the reduced, hardly human status of Haiti's enslaved population.

▲ **Voudon in practice**
Noise, music, and dance predominate in Voudon rituals, and everyone takes part. Such uninhibited celebrations alarmed early European observers.

The Haitian revolt

In 1791, Haiti's enslaved rose in revolt. After a confused and bloody struggle, Haiti emerged in 1804 as the world's first black republic. It remains the only successful slave revolt in history. At first sight, a popular revolt may not seem obviously connected to a world of magic. However, Voudon was at the heart of the uprising, the catalyst that launched and sustained it. The mystical, other-worldly elements of Voudon were critical in the forging of a new nation. Whatever the many sufferings Haiti has since endured, the longing for the divine, still at the core of Voudon, proved astonishingly effective in defying the combined might of France, Britain, Spain, and the US, countries that were all anxious to preserve slavery.

New Orleans Voodoo

In the aftermath of the Haitian revolt, substantial numbers of formerly enslaved people and their descendants emigrated. Many settled in New Orleans, part of the US since 1803. Here, a



▶ Voudon altar
All sorts of symbols are pressed into service to represent the teeming spirit world of Voudon. Dolls—the more brightly colored the better—have long been favored. Here, the snakes entwined around the arms of Mama Wati (a water spirit) are symbols of fertility and renewal.

distinctive New Orleans Voudon developed, which was much more overtly magical in its beliefs and practices. One of the most famous 19th-century practitioners was Marie Laveau, a hairdresser turned Voudon-savant. By the end of her life, she was widely regarded as the "Voodoo Queen of New Orleans," a healer, hexer, and fortune-teller, consulted by the highest and the lowest of the city. Her legacy survives today only in tourist-driven sales of Voodoo dolls.



▲ **Lucky root**
The John the Conqueror root is particularly valued by practitioners of Hoodoo. It has been claimed both to bestow magical sexual potency and to ensure luck in gambling.

The power of Hoodoo

Hoodoo was always different from Voudon. Where Voudon traces its origins to West Africa, and especially Dahomey (today's Benin), Hoodoo is drawn from Central Africa, specifically the Congo. Its practitioners today can be found across the US, even if its roots remain in the Deep South with memories of slavery and oppression.

Hoodoo draws on a wide range of folk-magic sources. It is as indebted to the likes of Johann Hohman's *Pow-Wows; or Long-Lost Friend* and to the mythical *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* (see pp.202–203) as it is to its African origins. From the natural world, Hoodoo makes use of herbs and roots—its practitioners are often called "rootworkers"—of animal parts, and minerals, especially lodestones (minerals that are naturally magnetic). It also calls on an array of candles, oils, incense, and powders. Hoodoo holds out the promise of love and riches, and something for everyone. It offers cures and curses; good and bad luck. Its practitioners predict the future, using animal bones for divination, and also interpret dreams. Hoodoo is still fueled by proverbs and stories, and by a rich blend of ancient lore and claimed wisdom. It is a legacy of a much older world of folk magic distilled down the ages and across continents.



IN CONTEXT

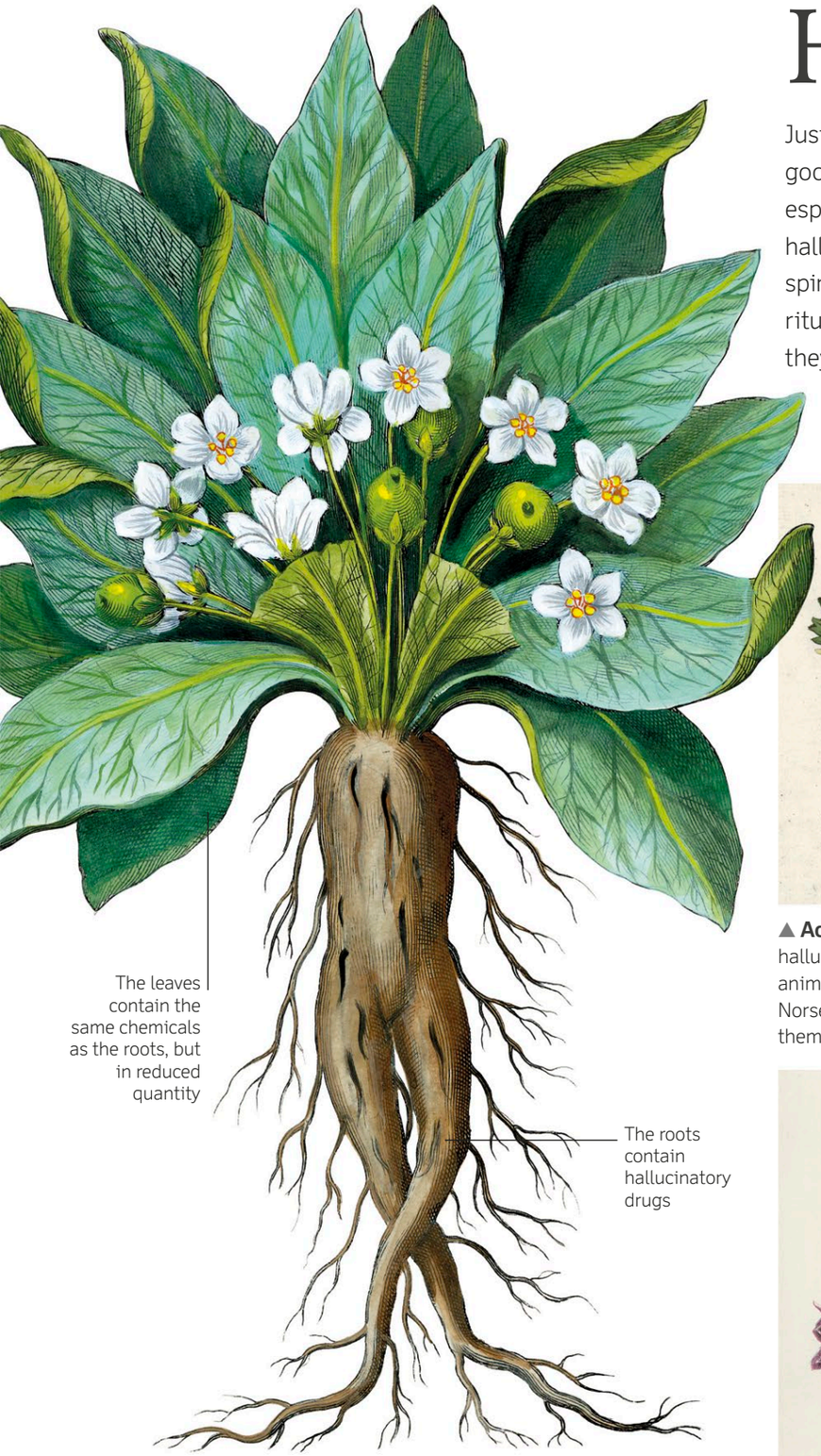
West African links

Voudon may most obviously be associated with Haiti. However, it is still active in West Africa, particularly in Benin, where it originated in the Fon religion and where there are believed to be four million followers of Voudon today (see pp.292–293). This talismanic statue—a fetish, called a *bocio*—is typical. Its purpose is partly holistic, as a source of natural healing, and partly to protect its owner from evil outside forces. Although the *bocio* can be appealed to directly, with no priest as intermediary, certain blood sacrifices, typically of chickens or goats, are required to unleash its power. *Bocio* may be carved from bones, stones, or wood, and some are light enough to carry.

This Fon *bocio* is laden with powerful objects to protect its maker.

Harmful plants

Just as some plants have been, and still are, used for healing and good magic, so others have long had more sinister associations, especially those that are deadly poisonous. Certain plants contain hallucinogens, used to induce trances and visions, to ward off evil spirits or, in the case of mandrake root, to feature in black magic rituals. In the past, some plants had such a bad reputation that they were believed to bring evil just by growing near the home, particularly if they happened to bloom out of season.



▲ **Mandrake** is the most feared of plants and owes its reputation to its man-shaped roots, which, when pulled from the ground, allegedly uttered a deadly shriek. However, sucking a mandrake leaf for a month was said to give a wizard the power to change into an animal.



▲ **Aconite** (wolfsbane) can cause hallucinations of shape-shifting into an animal and it was said to be taken by Norse Berserker warriors to transform themselves into werewolves for battle.



▲ **Elder trees** are rich in healing qualities but they are also the "death tree" because they seem to regenerate from dead branches. Cutting one down is said to release a malevolent spirit.



▲ **Belladonna** (deadly nightshade) is poisonous and has hallucinogenic properties. Witches reportedly rubbed the plant into their thighs to enable them to fly on broomsticks.



▲ **Blackthorn** is thought of as a plant of ill omen. Yet magically, it is used to protect against evil, dispel negativity and toxins, and help people confront their inner demons.



▲ **Wormwood** was thought to have grown first along the trail of the serpent as it left the Old Testament Garden of Eden. It is associated with bitterness. Magically, it is used in spells for revenge.



▲ **Datura** is highly hallucinogenic and potentially fatally poisonous. It has long played a part in the rituals of some Native Americans as they prepare for spiritual journeys.



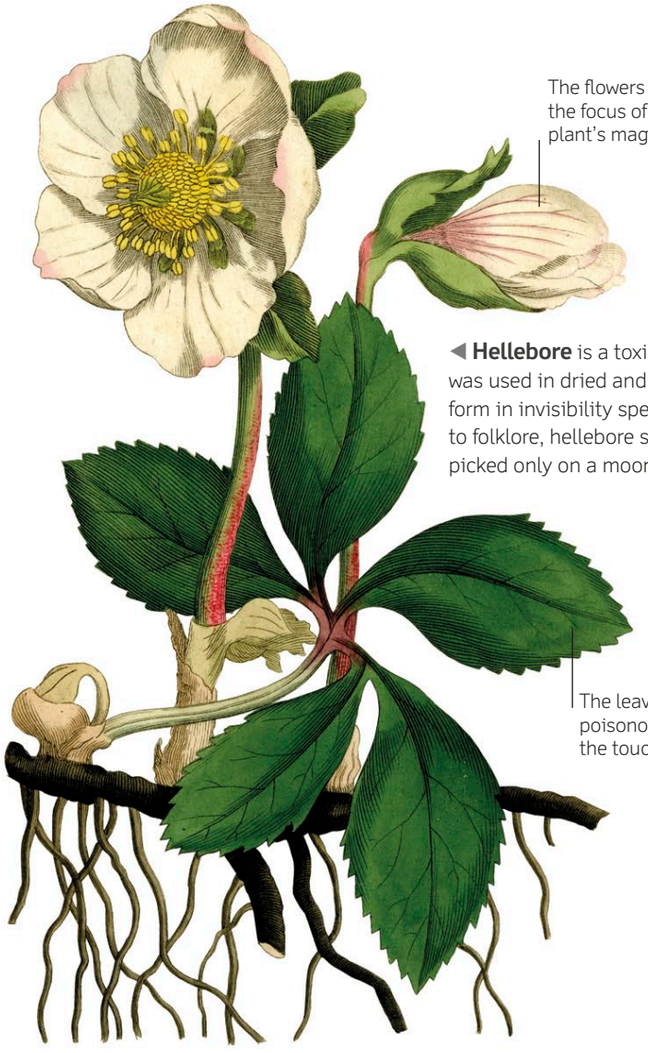
▲ **Hemlock** contains the deadly poison that was used to execute the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates. Even in small quantities, it causes paralysis and respiratory failure.



▲ **Henbane** is highly hallucinatory. The oracle priests in the ancient Greek temple at Delphi smoked it to communicate with the gods. Witches reportedly used it to fly.



▲ **Larkspur** sprang from the blood of fallen warrior Ajax according to ancient Greek mythology, and so it is believed to heal wounds and, by extension, offer general protection.



◀ **Hellebore** is a toxic plant that was used in dried and powdered form in invisibility spells. According to folklore, hellebore should be picked only on a moonless night.

HARNESSING THE LIFE FORCE

mesmerism and hypnosis

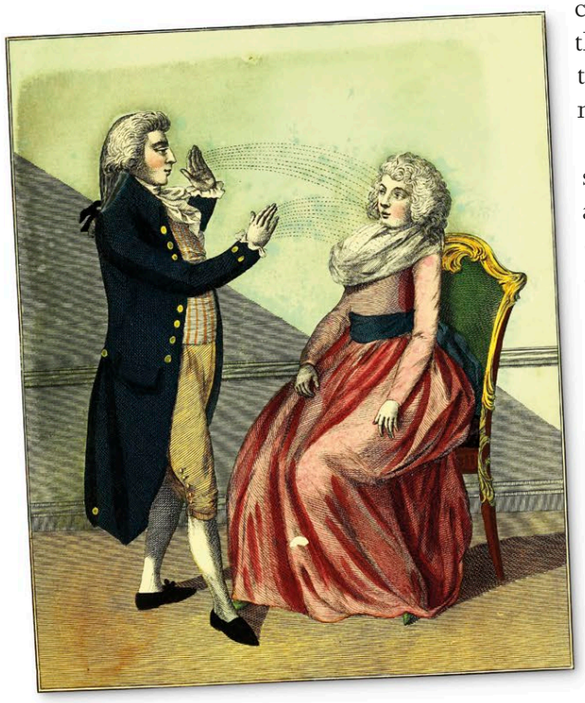


▼ **Fixed eye contact**
Mesmer was in thrall to the notion of magnetic forces, visible in this image, that could be passed to and from willing subjects, bringing them under his benevolent power.

The word *mesmerism* comes from an 18th-century German doctor, Franz Mesmer. He championed the belief that all life forms, animal and vegetable, possessed a magnetic energy or fluid, and that, influenced by the planets, this energy acted much like the tides. He believed that illnesses were created by blockages of the energy's normal movements, and therefore that the deft use of magnets applied by someone who possessed powerful personal magnetism—such as Mesmer himself—could cure ailments. He called this transfer of energy, which in time included inanimate objects, "animal magnetism."

Trance and atmosphere

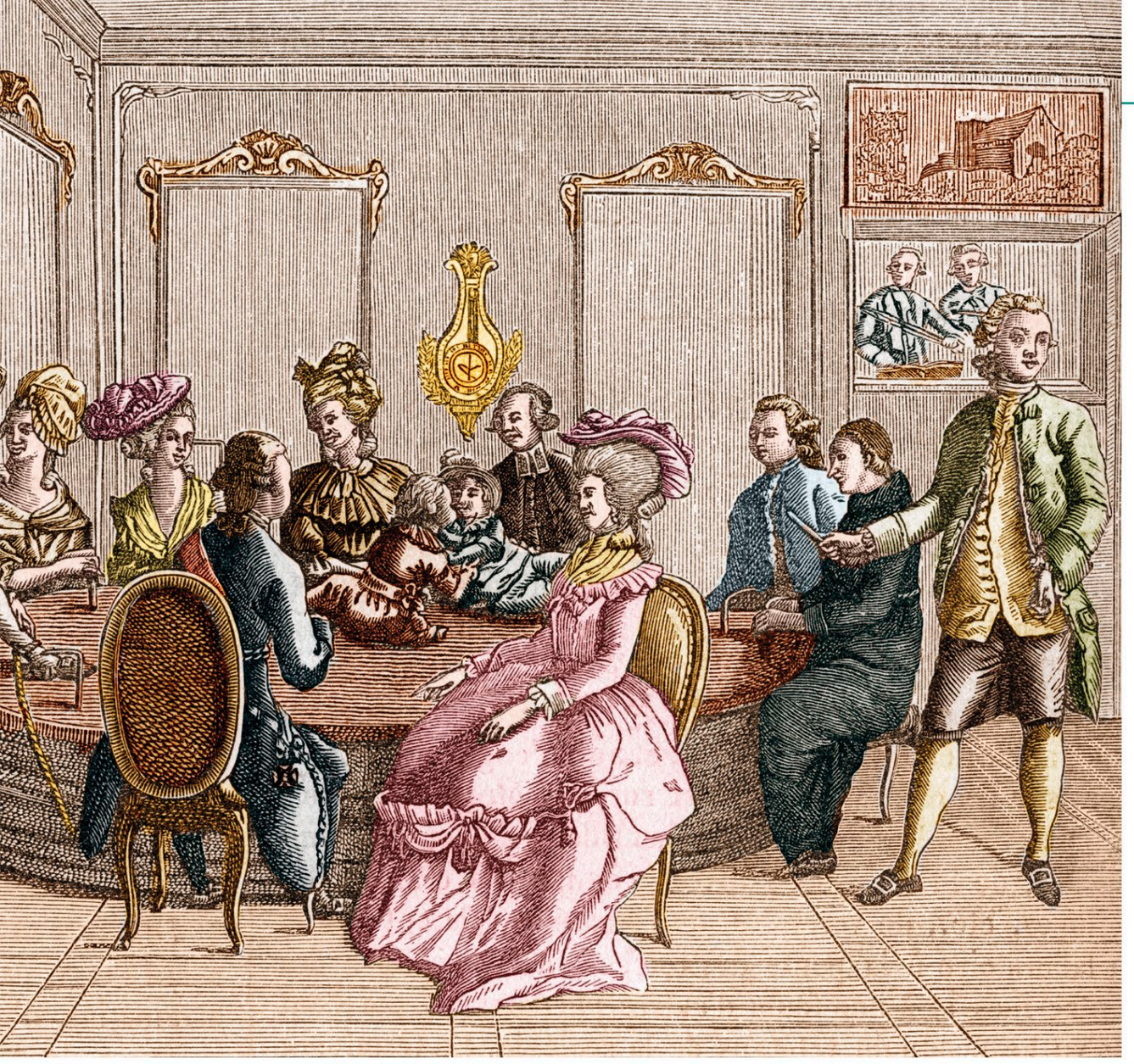
Mesmer developed his theory in Vienna. But it was in Paris after 1778 that he elaborated it fully and gained his greatest fame. At its heart was a semi-mystical trancelike state that Mesmer induced in his patients as he fixated them with a penetrating gaze while manipulating and squeezing parts of their bodies. If successful, a series of hysterical convulsions followed. This was the "crisis," the moment when the ailment was cured and a natural equilibrium restored.



Mesmer's popularity was such that, rather than turn away his clients, almost all drawn from the higher reaches of society, he saw them in groups of 20 or more. These sessions were as much theatrical as medical. The patients would be grouped around the *baquet* (see opposite); the lighting low; the silence broken only by distant, almost celestial music.

Mesmer, often clad in a long, lavender robe, passed among his patients, touching, pointing, directing, and gazing intently. Periodically, a patient would enter a state of catalepsy, apparently frozen, or would violently twitch and sob, laugh

> "This system sheds new light upon the nature of fire and of light, as well as on the theory of attraction …"
>
> **FRANZ MESMER** ON ANIMAL MAGNETISM, 1779



◀ Group treatment
The great and the good of Paris flocked to Mesmer's ritualistic treatments in the 1780s. Even the French queen, Marie Antoinette, attended. On the left here, a woman faints, while others are seated around the *baquet* (see below).

uncontrollably, or even vomit. A contemporary English doctor noted not only the "air of mystery" that permeated the spectacle but also that "the scene was full of wonderment."

Quack or genuine believer?

What was effectively a form of hypnosis later proved hugely influential in orthodox and complementary medicine. Mesmerism also contributed to the growth of spiritualism (see pp.224–227) and to hypnosis as a public spectacle.

At the time, Mesmer continued to press for official recognition of the existence of his vital life force. He never received it. Mesmer's treatments seemed perilously closer to the occult than to medicine, as he apparently assumed control of his patients' minds. In 1785, a royal commission ruled that there was no evidence for the magnetic force Mesmer claimed, and he was discredited.

IN PRACTICE

Mesmer's magic tub

The water-filled wooden container Mesmer called a *baquet* was the central element of his treatments and the focus of his gatherings. Iron rods projected from the *baquet*, while inside it they were inserted into cylinders, each containing a magnet to magnetize the water. The rods were bent, and Mesmer placed their ends on any given patient's afflicted area. Ropes were strung from the *baquet* to link the patients seated around it and allow more forces to flow, and the patients also held hands to spread the magnetism.





▶ **Magnetic tree**
The Marquis de Puységur's method was to rope his subjects to an elm tree, which he had magnetized. He then passed a magnet over them to induce a form of hypnosis.



ELIPHAS LEVI (1810–75)

French occultist extraordinaire

Eliphas Lévi's real name was Alphonse Constant, and he had trained, though never qualified, as a Catholic priest. He became a socialist and, inspired by Mesmer, an enthusiast for magic. Lévi argued for a universal order based on Catholicism, socialism, and magic. His book *Transcendental Magic: Its Doctrine and Ritual* described and illustrated the Baphomet (see left), an idol first chronicled by the medieval Crusaders. Lévi called the creature his "Sabbatic goat," and claimed that it held all knowledge. With its many magical meanings, it represents male and female, good and evil, fertility and life. Lévi's work is still studied by magicians today.

Baphomet was a monster with a goat's head, woman's body, wings, a pentagram on its forehead, and alchemical quotations on its arms.

The power of sleep

Mesmer was effectively branded a charlatan, and he died in exile in Switzerland in 1815. However, his legacy remained and mesmerism itself continued to be practiced well into the 19th century. Among its most influential proponents was the Marquis de Puységur. He was an avid disciple of Mesmer, but from the 1780s he pioneered a new form of hypnotic induction that he termed "artificial somnambulism," somnambulism meaning sleepwalking. Not only was the subject unaware of his or her condition, but, susceptible to hypnotic suggestion, they would later perform any act that the mesmerist had put to them.

Subconscious revealed

The realization that human beings have a powerful subconscious as well as conscious mind had huge implications for the development of psychology, and for the occult and the supernatural. It also paved the way for the emergence of the medium (the middle person communicating between the spirit and material worlds).

In 1841, James Braid, a Scottish doctor and pillar of the Scottish medical establishment, became a sudden convert to the potential of mesmerism as a legitimate medical tool after watching a performance by a French mesmerist, Charles Lafontaine. What struck him were not the theatrical antics of Lafontaine but the fact that the subjects had so evidently been reduced to a trance, unable even to open their eyes. On further investigation, he demonstrated both the physical reality of this altered consciousness and its valuable medical application, not least as an anesthetic, as the subject was impervious to pain. Braid coined the new term "hypnosis," after Hypnos, the Greek god of sleep.

Into the occult

Braid and other hypnotists, notably two Frenchmen, Jean-Martin Charcot—one of whose pupils was Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis—and Hippolyte Bernheim, carried on their development of Mesmer's work. While they made clear the possibilities of hypnotism as a tool in the scientific study of the human mind, its appeal to the occult was equally apparent, as documented by French ceremonial magician and author Eliphas Lévi (see above).


LAUSANNE. — GRANDE SALLE DU CASINO.

MAGNÉTISME

E. ALLIX

PROFESSEUR DE MAGNÉTISME ET MEMBRE DE PLUSIEURS SOCIÉTÉS SAVANTES

DONNERA UNE

SÉANCE DE MAGNÉTISME

PROGRAMME

PRIX DU BILLET, 2 FR. — PLACES RÉSERVÉES, 3 FR.

COURS DE MAGNÉTISME EN 10 LEÇONS

▼ **Evening of magnetism**
This publicity sheet offers a demonstration of magnetism in Switzerland in May 1857 by one E. Allix, "Professeur de Magnétisme." Many showmen of dubious qualifications jumped on Mesmer's bandwagon.

"It is … extremely dangerous to make sport of the Mysteries of Magic."

ELIPHAS LEVI, *TRANSCENDENTAL MAGIC: ITS DOCTRINE AND RITUAL*, 1854–1856





▲ French tarot
These illustrations of La Papesse (The Lady Pope) and L' Impératrice (The Empress) are from Antoine Court de Gébelin's *Le Monde primitif*, a text that made the case for tarot as a divination tool.

"Each person stops playing [their cards] and comes to see this marvellous Card wherein I perceive what they have never seen."

ANTOINE COURT DE GEBELIN, *LE MONDE PRIMITIF*, 1781

READING THE CARDS

the tarot

Today familiar as a tool for fortune-telling—a form of divination—tarot cards originated in Europe in the early 15th century. Ordinary playing cards are believed to have come to Europe from Mamluk in Egypt a century earlier, and tarot was simply a variation. These early tarot cards were used purely for entertainment, and the name "tarot" comes from a game similar to bridge that was played with them in Italy called *tarocchi* (fool or joker).

The four suits in these early tarot cards were batons (later wands), coins (later pentacles), swords, and cups. Around 1440, special cards with allegorical illustrations were added to the tarot suits to create decks called *carte da trionfi* (triumph cards)—trump cards in English. At first the cards were hand-painted and rare, but after the invention of the printing press they were mass-produced.

Ancient Egyptian occult origins

In 1773, French scholar Antoine Court de Gébelin began writing a pivotal book called *Le Monde primitif* ("The Primitive World") about the ancestry of languages. Gébelin argued that tarot symbols were based on the mysterious ancient Egyptian text, the *Book of Thoth*. He also suggested that the Catholic Church had tried to suppress this knowledge, but that it had spread via the Romany people. There was little evidence to support his theories, and Books of Thoth since translated contain nothing resembling tarot. However, Gébelin's work sparked a fascination with tarot's occult possibilities.



▲ **All in the cards**
Jean-Baptiste Alliette's 19th-century Etteilla cards were the first set of tarot cards designed exclusively for divination. Their assigned meaning changes depending on the orientation of the card.

Use for divination

A decade later another Frenchman, Jean-Baptiste Alliette, wrote a book on how to use tarot cards for divination, and issued a set of cards. He called the book *Etteilla, ou L'art de lire dans les cartes* ("Etteilla, or The Art of Reading Cards")—"Etteilla" being his own name spelled backward. Alliette established tarot divination as a popular pursuit for the first time. He divined using a deck of just 32 cards with the addition of his own special Etteilla card, known as "the significator," which usually represented the person consulting the tarot reader.

IN CONTEXT

Consulting the stars

Astrology plays a significant role in how tarot cards and the positions they occupy in a reading (known as "spreads") are interpreted. This connection was established in the late 19th century by a secret society of British occultists called the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (see pp.242–243). The Order drew links between the tarot suits, each of the astrological signs, and the four classic elements. Fire is associated with the signs Aries, Leo, and Sagittarius, and the suit of Wands; Earth is affiliated with Taurus, Virgo, and Capricorn, and the suit of Pentacles; Air has links with Gemini, Libra, and Aquarius, and the suit of Swords; and Water goes with Cancer, Scorpio, and Pisces, and the suit of Cups.



The Moon (associated with Pisces), in this 15th-century example painted by Italian Antonio Cicognara, was one of the original cards of the tarot deck.



◀ Tarot comes to America
The first tarot style to gain major popularity in North America was the Egyptian deck designed by French occultists René Falconnier and Maurice Otto Wegener in 1890, based on ideas by Jean-Baptiste Pitois.

Kabbalistic tarot

As fascination with the occult grew in the 19th century, people increasingly used the tarot deck for divination rather than for games. Each card had a set meaning, which altered if that card was inverted when laid out.

One of the leading figures of tarot divination was Eliphas Lévi (see p.213), a French bohemian and socialist who in the 1860s wrote a series of books that made him a household name in the world of magic. Lévi believed that magic was the scientific basis of man's divinity. He observed an apparent link between tarot and the mystical tradition of Kabbalah (see pp.136–139), noting that the 22 trump cards of tarot match the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Lévi drew further links, and argued that the tarot could act as a road map through the Kabbalah Tree of Life, leading to enlightenment and heaven. It was Lévi's work that made tarot such a popular tool for divination.

In 1870, French occultist Jean-Baptiste Pitois's book *The History and Practice of Magic* explained the symbols of tarot as originating in initiation tests for Magi to reach the secret chambers under the Great Pyramid of Giza. Significantly, Pitois also described the tarot deck as dividing into two arcana (groups).

The Arcana

The Major Arcana (greater secrets) comprise the 22 trump cards, such as The Magician, The Star, and The Hanged Man; they do not belong to any suit, but carry specific significance. The Minor Arcana (lesser secrets) comprise the 56 suit cards, divided into four suits of 14 each. The first 78-card deck design based on Pitois's system is also known as the Tarot de Marseilles, as the game of tarot persisted in France long after it had died out in Italy.

In 1889, Swiss occultist Oswald Wirth designed a 22-card trump-only deck for divination based on kabbalistic symbols. Each trump card has its own links, for example: The Magician bridges the gap between the earth and heaven; The High Priestess, originally called La Papesse, was thought to refer to the female pope, Pope Joan. Since then many other packs have been designed for fortune-telling, although the tarot deck itself is still used for card games in France and Italy.



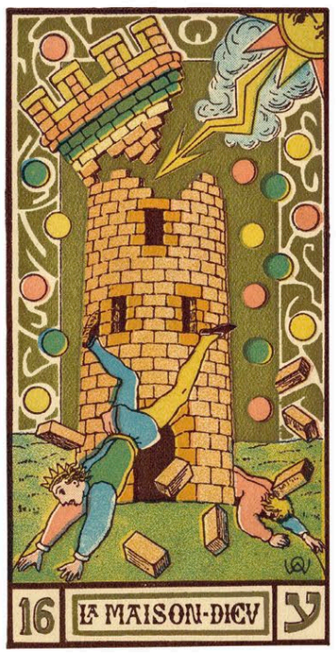
The Magician in this design is from the first English tarot deck of 1910.



The Devil here is a 19th-century French card influenced by Lévi.



The High Priestess design here is from the English 1910 Rider-Waite deck.



This Tower is a 1926 design by Wirth with kabbalistic symbols.



▼ On the cards
A dedicated tarot deck was not essential for divination. The girls in this Russian painting from 1842 by Aleksei Gavrilovich Venetsianov are divining their fortunes with ordinary playing cards.



▲ **The Empress** denotes the creation of life, ideas, art, romance, and business.



▲ **The Devil** stands for material greed, lust, fear, and feeling trapped.



▲ **The Hanged Man** card is ambiguous: he suggests both self-sacrifice and, because he is upside down, a new perspective.



▲ **Wheel of Fortune** indicates a change in fortune, such as the rich becoming poor or the poor becoming rich.



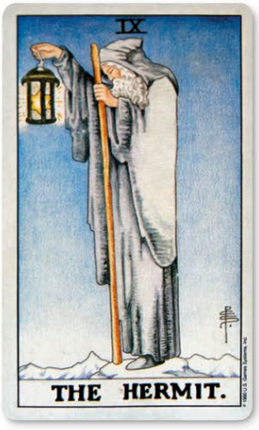
▲ **The Chariot** stands for strength, focus, and a willingness to take the reins; the black and white sphinxes pulling the chariot show opposites working in tandem.



▲ **The High Priestess**, or Popess, suggests intuition and secret knowledge.



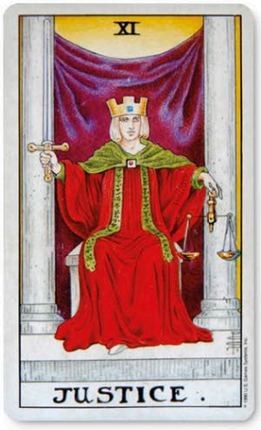
▲ **Strength** stands for control and dealing with pain and danger well.



▲ **The Hermit** represents isolation, withdrawal, and soul-searching.



▲ **Judgement** suggests an inner calling, rebirth, or self-doubt.



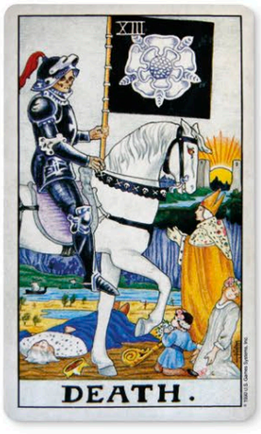
▲ **Justice** means fairness and balanced decisions, or unfair treatment if reversed.



▲ **The Sun** denotes vitality, confidence, and success, or the opposite if reversed.



▲ **The Fool**, or Joker, is unnumbered and highly important. The figure stands carefree on a cliff, ready for an exciting new journey or for a reckless step into the unknown.



▲ **Death** represents an ending of one phase of life, a spiritual transformation.



▲ **Temperance** stands for balance, moderation, patience, and direction.



▲ **The Hierophant** denotes spiritual wisdom, tradition, stability, or conformity.



▲ **The Star** stands for hope and faith—or despair and distrust if the card is reversed.



▲ **The World** represents coming together, completion, or travel.



▲ **The Magician** stands for inspiration, talent, vision—or the opposite if reversed.



▲ **The Moon** stands for the subconscious, illusions, repressed fears, or anxiety.



▲ **The Emperor** represents authority, a father figure, or negative domination.



▲ **The Lovers** points to a decision about a relationship, a choice of partners, or a temptation of the heart, often involving a sacrifice.



▲ **The Tower** denotes a crisis, an upheaval, or a revelation: the building may look solid, but it is built on high and shaky ground.

The Major Arcana

The 22 picture cards in the Tarot are called the Major Arcana—the greater secrets—each of which has a particular meaning, with that meaning reversed when the card is drawn upside down. Of the many ways to tell a fortune with Tarot, the three-card spread is one of the simplest: drawing three cards from a shuffled pack that represent—from left to right—past, present, and future, and combine to answer a specific question.



ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Romantics and renegades

During the 1700s and into the 1800s—an age of revolution and Romanticism—supernatural and occult ideas inspired major creative works. Romanticism celebrated an individual's emotions and expression; it often broke free of accepted rules and valued intuition and transcendence (experience beyond the normal, physical level). The artistic outpouring of the Romantic era was fueled by political revolutions that ousted old orders across the world, from France to North America, and was a reaction against the rational Enlightenment.

Goya's mysterious witches

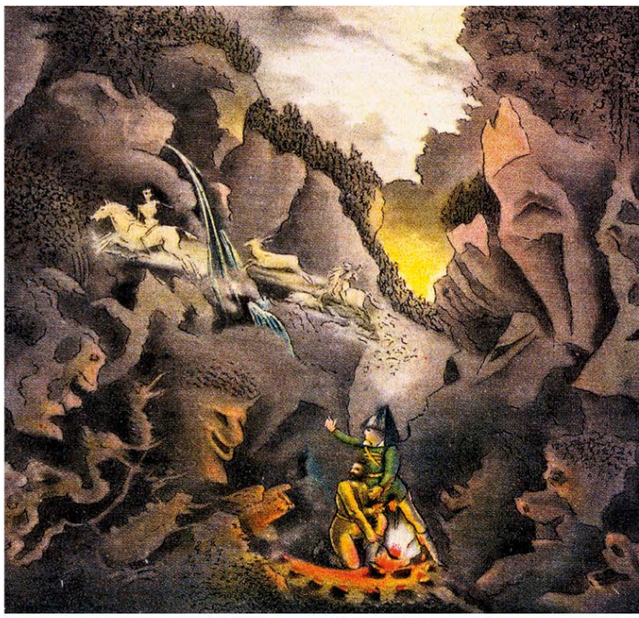
Spanish artist Goya had a deep interest in witches and the supernatural. He used the imagery of dark fantasy to explore social and political realism, producing some compelling but sinister paintings. The intriguing *Witches' Flight* (c. 1798, left) shows three airborne witches carrying a fourth, splayed person. The work's meaning is contested: it could be an anti-witchcraft statement or a criticism of the religious establishment.

Nature and the demonic

Literature and music also explored otherworldly themes. American poet-philosophers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau created a Transcendental school of writing that promoted Romantic ideals of intuition, seeing God in nature, and personal liberty. The supernatural was featured by various British Romantic poets, led by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who explored the divine magic of nature in works such as their joint *Lyrical Ballads*.

In contrast to admiring the magic of nature, American Dark Romantics, especially Edgar Allan Poe, created literary works that combined necromancy (communicating with the dead), the occult, metempsychosis (the transmigration of souls), ceremonial magic, and mesmerism (see pp.210–213). Two of Poe's short stories that encapsulated such themes were "Morella," a morbid four-page tale of marriage, Gothic horror, and mysticism, and "Ligeia," which included a magic circle and opium-induced visions of a corpse coming back to life.

In the world of opera, von Weber's work *Der Freischütz* is famed for its unsettling supernaturalism. It features a battle between good and evil involving strange spirits, a Devil's pact, and magic bullets.



▲ Spirit landscape
This print shows an early set for the disturbing Wolf's Glen scene in German Romantic Carl Maria von Weber's opera *Der Freischütz* (1821). The set's landscape is alive with spirits and odd creatures.

◀ Occult allegory
Here, Goya's witches wear hats that may echo headgear worn by those prosecuted during the Spanish Inquisition, while the man below is making a hand gesture to ward off the evil eye.



◀ Supernatural messages of doom
In Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Raven," illustrated here by Gustave Doré, a man yearning to meet his lost love in heaven has all hope dashed by a talking raven messenger.



▲ **Gothic horror** features in this version of a frontispiece for *Tales of Terror* (1801), thought to be by "Monk" Lewis.



Gothic magic

The 1790s brought a European outpouring of darkly thrilling—often shocking—"Gothic" literature that celebrated the supernatural, occult, and macabre. This major trend, which had begun in the mid-1700s, was allied with the Romantic movement, and continued into the 1800s, as in the American Dark Romanticism genre.

Antiquated buildings, such as ruined medieval castles or monasteries in the Gothic style of architecture, were popular settings for this type of fiction, and gave it the term "Gothic." Underground passages, trapdoors, and secret panels were common devices, as were characters such as ghosts, demons, and ungodly monks. Strange encounters with these characters sometimes sent the protagonists into unusual psychological states, in which they had disturbing or awe-inspiring occult experiences.

One of Gothic literature's foundational texts was Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto,* a supernatural mystery featuring an ancient prophecy, set in an eerie castle. Published 30 years later, Matthew G. ("Monk") Lewis's *The Monk* is claimed as English literature's first horror novel, and it includes both black magic and Satanism. Other masterpieces of Gothic horror are Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, in which a scientist brings to life a man from the body parts of corpses, and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, a tale of haunting, insanity, and death. Many writers of the 19th century, from Emily Brontë and Nathaniel Hawthorne to Pascual Pérez Rodríguez, used some degree of Gothicism, and their classic novels are still popular today.

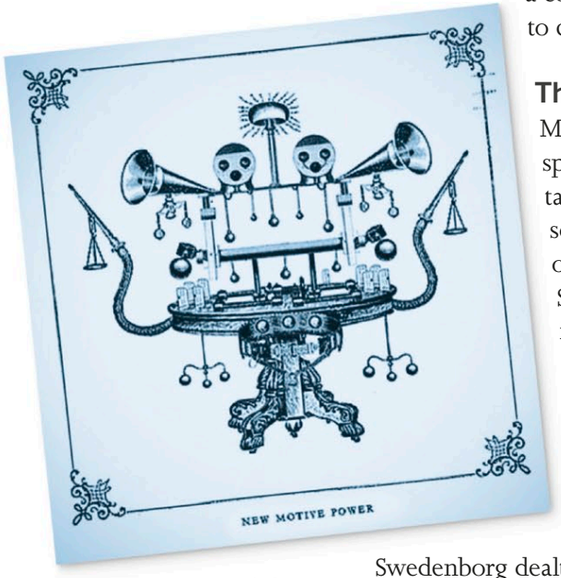
"We call up the hidden and evil spirits of the inner world."

LETITIA ELIZABETH LANDON, *THE BRIDE OF LINDORF*, 1836

SPEAKING WITH THE DEAD

spiritualism

From the mid-19th century onward, the practice of spiritualism became a craze across Europe and America. The key idea, based on the mainstream Christian belief in an afterlife, was that people who had died inhabited a "spirit world" and the living could communicate with them, typically through a facilitator called a medium. A major reason for the popularity of spiritualism was that it offered a consoling chance for the bereaved to communicate with lost loved ones.



▲ Brave new world?
Mid-century spiritualist ideas included J.M. Spear's New Motive Power machine of 1854, shown here in an etching. With a table and magnetized balls, this electrical machine was intended to connect humans to God: the plan was that it would be animated by a spirit.

The Witch of Endor

Many ideas prompted the rise of spiritualism. One was the biblical tale about the Witch of Endor, a sorceress who summoned the spirit of the prophet Samuel for King Saul. Her name became a byword for raising spirits from the dead. The ideas of many influential Enlightenment-era thinkers and, later, Romantics also fed into spiritualism. In his 1758 book *Heaven and Hell*, the Swedish mystic and scientist Emanuel Swedenborg dealt with life after death and communing with the spirit world, while German physician Franz Anton Mesmer (see pp.210–213) promoted trance states linked with channeling and transmitting powerful forces.

A sensational start

Modern spiritualism is often said to have started in upstate New York in 1848 with two sisters, Maggie and Kate Fox, who, it was claimed, could commune with the dead. Spirit beings apparently made eerie rapping noises in response to questions posed by the girls in their humble home. Aided by their elder sister, Leah, the Fox sisters soon acquired great fame as the first major mediums of modern spiritualism, convincing many of their authenticity. They were much imitated in the middle-class parlors of



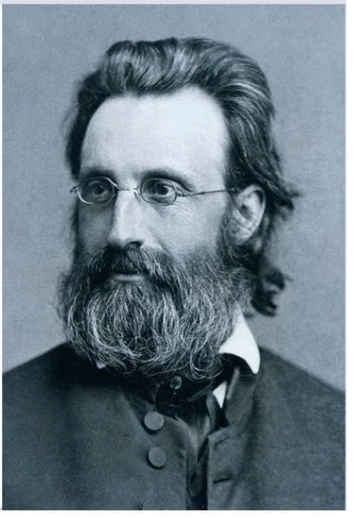


◀ Sisterly séances
Once they became celebrities, the Fox sisters' séance repertoire included such marvels as moving objects and levitating tables. This 19th-century print depicts a séance that they held in Rochester, New York, in 1850.

ANDREW JACKSON DAVIS (1826–1910)

The Poughkeepsie Seer

A particular influence on John Murray Spear (see below) was Andrew Jackson Davis, an American clairvoyant, spirit-channeler, and mesmerist healer. He was an early practitioner of spiritualism, nicknamed the "Poughkeepsie Seer" after he developed his true calling in the town of that name. Davis drew heavily on Swedenborg's ideas (see opposite) and in turn probably influenced writers such as Edgar Allan Poe. He claimed to channel special wisdom in works such as *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind*, which he dictated while in a trance.



America, England, and France. However, some people were skeptical about the Foxes, and Maggie once stated that their work was all a hoax (only to later recant this). It is now widely believed that they produced the raps by cracking bone joints, and that they were in fact charlatans.

Messiah machine

Another spiritualist episode occurred in the 1840s: American Universalist minister and human rights campaigner John Murray Spear experienced strange visions, which led him to explore spiritualism. Universalism, a product of the American Enlightenment, centered on salvation for everyone. Guided by spirit voices from beyond the grave, allegedly including that of Benjamin Franklin, Spear built a utopian machine that would supposedly bring eternal redemption and leisure for all. In 1854, spiritualist newspaper *The New Era* announced the "New Motive Power" machine's completion, at the then-astronomical cost of around $2,000. Spear's project ultimately fell foul of skepticism and failed, but the spiritualist ideas behind it had made their mark.



IN CONTEXT

The new face of witchcraft

In the 1940s, a wartime scandal highlighted how modern spiritualism had stirred up ancient fears about witchcraft. Helen Duncan was a Scottish medium who claimed to produce ectoplasm (a slimy substance that represented the spirits of the dead) from her mouth or nose. She was found guilty of making fraudulent claims to supernatural powers, and the ectoplasmic spirits were said to be made from cheesecloth, paper, chemicals, and faces cut from magazines. She became the last woman to be imprisoned under the British 1735 Witchcraft Act. However, some believed that the Act was not fit for purpose and her case probably helped speed its repeal in 1951.

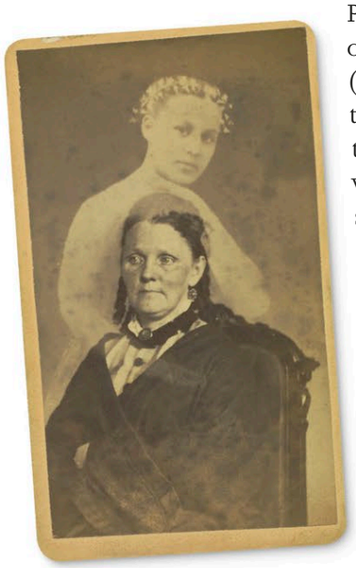
Helen Duncan appears to be linked to her spirit guide, "Peggy."

Contacting the fallen

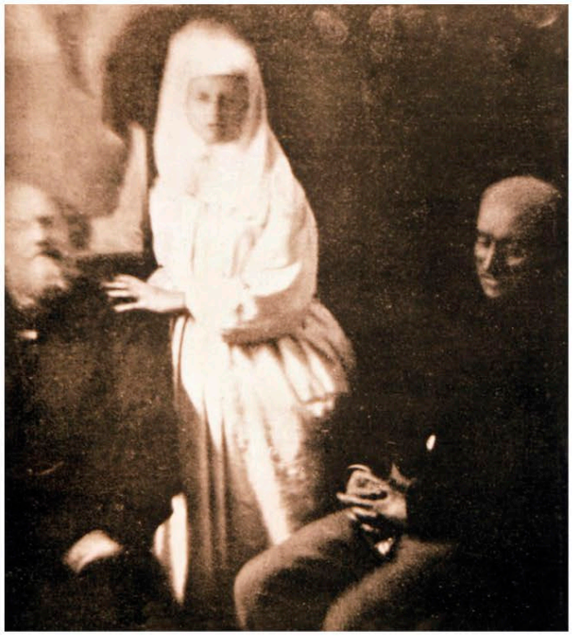
Public interest in making contact with lost loved ones rose sharply during the American Civil War (1861–1865). Childhood death, still common in this era, also fueled the growing popularity of the spiritualist movement. Abraham Lincoln's wife Mary Todd, for example, found comfort in spiritualism after the loss of her son.

By the late 1800s, the spiritualist movement had millions of adherents, but followers' motivations varied widely. Some saw spiritualism itself as a kind of religion, keen to promote the idea that it offered serious concrete proof of life after death. An element involving spiritual healing also developed, as exemplified by Andrew Jackson Davis's interest in mesmerism. However, there was also a different side to spiritualism. Its practice was typically organized as séances, overseen by mediums whose aim was apparently to enable their audiences to communicate with the spirits of the dead (see pp.228–229).

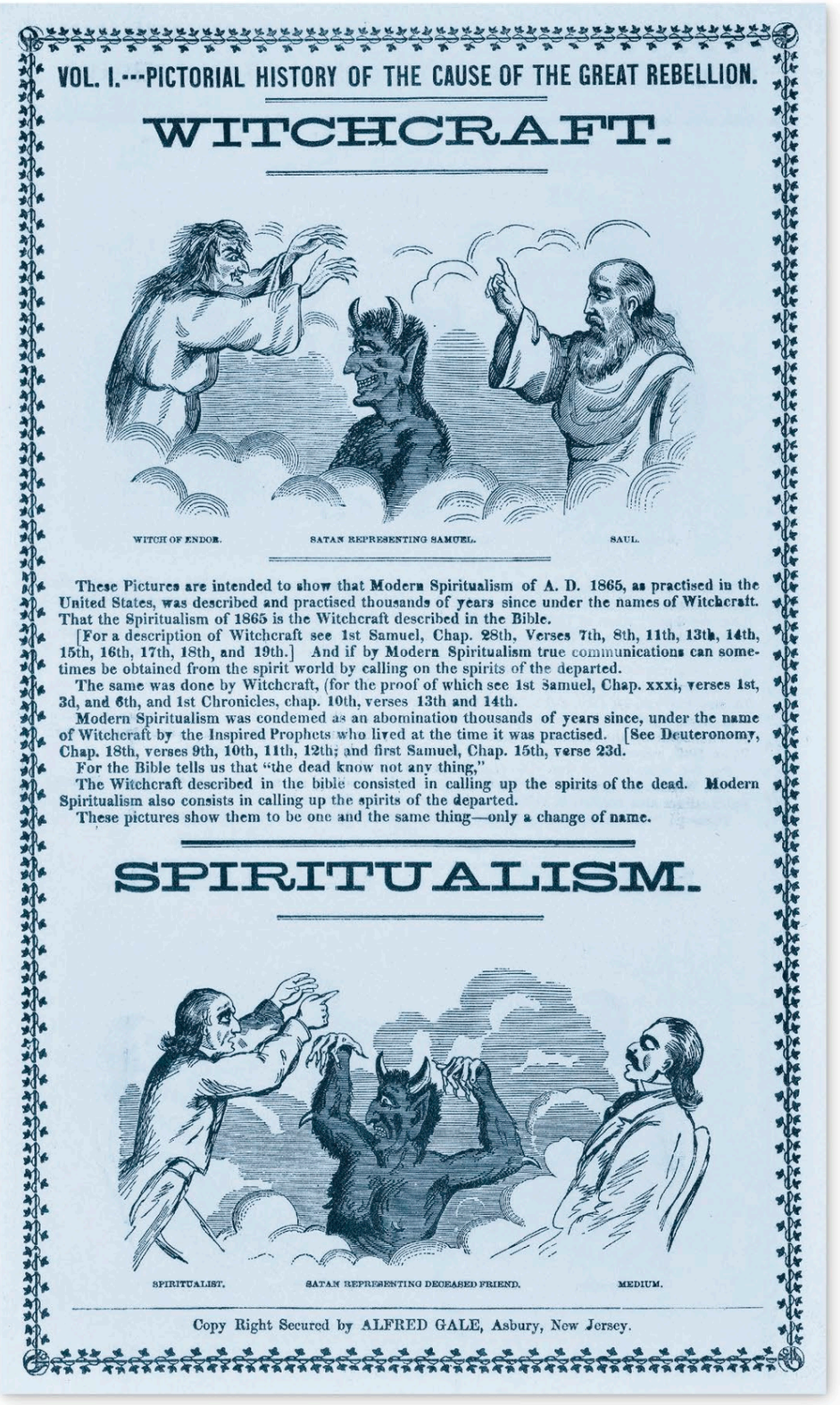
Private and public demonstrations by celebrity mediums proliferated across Europe and the US. For instance, Scottish-born Daniel Dunglas Home was much favored by the European upper classes and even royalty. His talents included levitation: he was once reportedly seen floating out of one upper-floor window into another. Spiritualism enjoyed a celebrity following, too, with enthusiasts such as the Scottish writer Arthur Conan Doyle. Scientists, including William Crookes, a British chemist and President of the Royal Society, were also among its supporters. Crookes endorsed the work of British medium Florence Cook who during séances was said to materialize the spirit "Katie King" either in full or as a disembodied head.



▲ **Ghost in the machine**
Photographer William Mumler was famed for his images of people with "ghosts" in the background. Many of his clients found comfort in seeing lost loved ones appear as if by miracle.



▶ **Uncanny transformations**
This 1874 photograph convinced scientist William Crookes of medium Florence Cook's transformation into her alter ego "Katie King." When the similarity of Florence's and Katie's appearance was pointed out Crookes' belief was discredited.


VOL. I.---PICTORIAL HISTORY OF THE CAUSE OF THE GREAT REBELLION.

WITCHCRAFT.

WITCH OF ENDOR. SATAN REPRESENTING SAMUEL. SAUL.

These Pictures are intended to show that Modern Spiritualism of A. D. 1865, as practised in the United States, was described and practised thousands of years since under the names of Witchcraft. That the Spiritualism of 1865 is the Witchcraft described in the Bible.

[For a description of Witchcraft see 1st Samuel, Chap. 28th, Verses 7th, 8th, 11th, 13th, 14th, 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th.] And if by Modern Spiritualism true communications can sometimes be obtained from the spirit world by calling on the spirits of the departed.

The same was done by Witchcraft, (for the proof of which see 1st Samuel, Chap. xxxi, verses 1st, 3d, and 6th, and 1st Chronicles, chap. 10th, verses 13th and 14th.

Modern Spiritualism was condemed as an abomination thousands of years since, under the name of Witchcraft by the Inspired Prophets who lived at the time it was practised. [See Deuteronomy, Chap. 18th, verses 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th; and first Samuel, Chap. 15th, verse 23d.

For the Bible tells us that "the dead know not any thing."

The Witchcraft described in the bible consisted in calling up the spirits of the dead. Modern Spiritualism also consists in calling up the spirits of the departed.

These pictures show them to be one and the same thing—only a change of name.

SPIRITUALISM.

SPIRITUALIST. SATAN REPRESENTING DECEASED FRIEND. MEDIUM.

Copy Right Secured by ALFRED GALE, Asbury, New Jersey.

▶ **Witches' war**
Detractors of spiritualism often equated it with witchcraft. This 19th-century image, complete with the Witch of Endor and Satan, defines spiritualism as another form of the witchcraft condemned in the Bible, and cites it as a cause of the Great Rebellion (the American Civil War).

Fraud, heresy, and reform

The lure of money and fame led to numerous instances of outrageous fraud, and some spiritualist practitioners were prosecuted. In 1869, William Mumler, an American "spirit photographer," underwent a sensational fraud trial. He was acquitted on lack of evidence, but his spiritualist career was virtually destroyed. Seven years later in England, American medium Henry Slade was also tried for fraud—and found guilty. His "spirit messages," which seemed to appear on slates, were revealed to have been written with his toes.

In 1887, the University of Pennsylvania's Seybert Commission for Investigating Modern Spiritualism produced a report that was generally negative about spiritualistic practice. The views of organized Christian religion, both Protestant and Catholic, were also largely negative. A Catholic edict of 1898 condemned spiritualism, and many Church figures equated it with witchcraft and necromancy.

However, Nonconformists and Quakers forged connections with spiritualism, as did the reform movements for women's suffrage and the abolition of slavery. Pascal Beverly Randolph, an American spiritualist and Rosicrucian, was an abolitionist, and American spiritualist Achsa W. Sprague advocated for both abolition and women's rights. Spiritualists valued traits such as intuition and sensitivity—considered feminine in the 19th century—but claiming to channel spirits let female practitioners express views that could otherwise have been dismissed as inappropriate. Many women pursued careers as mediums, probably also drawn by the opportunities for travel, adventure, and fame.

"Oh the road to En-dor is the oldest road
And the craziest road of all!"

RUDYARD KIPLING ON SPIRITUALISM, FROM HIS POEM "EN-DOR", 1919

N° 1. — 10 janvier 1909. — Publication bi-mensuelle paraissant le 10 et le 25. — PRIX EXCEPTIONNEL : 10 c

LA VIE MYSTÉRIEUSE



DIRECTEUR : Professeur DONATO

MAGNÉTISME — SPIRITISME — MAGIE — ASTROLOGIE — CHIROMANCIE — GRAPHOLOGIE — CARTOMANCIE

Les Tables parlantes



Lire, à la page 3, l'article : Comment je devins spirite.

CHANNELING THE SPIRITS

mediums and séances

By the turn of the 20th century the medium-directed séance was cemented in popular culture. Séances were demonstrations during which mediums supposedly channeled spirits, acting as intermediaries between those spirits and members of the audience. These increasingly dramatic events came to feature tables turning and floating as well as Ouija boards (see pp.230–231), while mediums often entered trance-like states before speaking or writing on the spirits' behalf. Such shows became full of thrilling theatrical excess, playing to the 19th-century love of stage magic.

Trance speaking

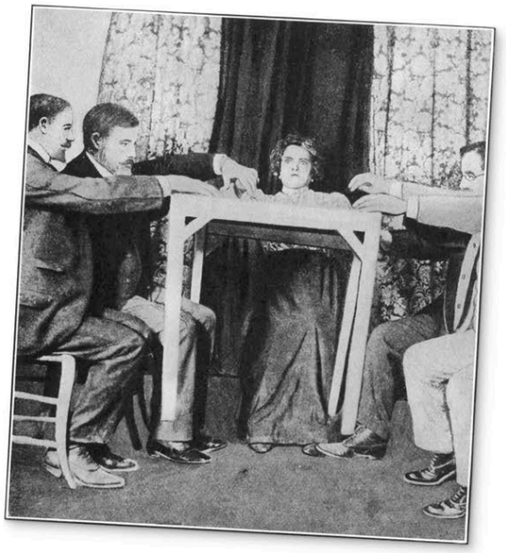
Numerous mediums claimed to channel the words of spirits while in a state of trance. In the US, the spiritualist Leonora Piper described her trances as being "as if something were passing over my brain making it numb." In this state, her changed voice and appearance convinced onlookers that she was inhabited by another persona. Such personas were often believed to be spirit controls who were themselves intermediaries between Leonora and the spirits of other deceased people. Another high-profile American medium, Cora L.V. Scott, gained fame in the later 1800s as a beautiful, inspirational speaker on a wide range of topics, and apparently spoke while in a trance as the spirits moved her.

Materialization

French medium Eva Carrière appeared to conjure ghostly figures and produce ectoplasm (a spiritual manifestation) from her naked body. There was skepticism about such tricks, and after an investigation Carrière was exposed as a fraud: her spirits were cardboard cut-outs, and her ectoplasm was chewed paper.

Spirit messages

Table-turning was all the rage. People sat with their hands on a table, which would seemingly tilt, rise, or rotate as a means of communication from spirits of the departed. For example, a spirit message might be spelled out by a medium saying letters of the alphabet aloud and certain letters apparently making the table move. Such movements could be explained by the "ideomotor effect," where simply thinking about a kind of motion causes involuntary physical responses that end up making it happen, without subjects having taken any conscious choice to move.



▲ **The spirits rise up**
One of celebrated Italian medium Eusapia Palladino's talents was making tables levitate. This picture dates from 1892 when a major investigation of her methods was underway, and it was concluded that her practices were clever tricks rather than supernatural phenomena.



◀ **Talking tables**
One of the many spiritualist publications in circulation at the time, this 1909 edition of *La Vie mystérieuse* has a feature on table-turning or *tables parlantes* (talking tables).

▶ **Looking into the future**
Crystal-gazing was a staple of popular spiritualism. After elaborate cleaning of the crystal ball, practitioners would peer into it to divine the future, or to see lost loved ones.

Ouija boards

Spirit writing, or *Fuji*, was first practiced in China 1,500 years ago: it involved a suspended stick, apparently guided by spirits, that wrote Chinese characters in ash. Today spirit writing is known chiefly through Ouija boards, patented in the US. Spiritualism (see pp.224–227) became hugely popular after the American Civil War, when many of the bereaved had a desire to contact lost loved ones. In response to this, in 1891 the Kennard Novelty Company launched the Ouija board. It comprised a ring of letters and numbers, and a planchette (pointer) that participants touched; this allowed spirits, it was claimed, to guide the planchette and spell out words.

While some believed spirits of the dead genuinely spoke through the Ouija board, others were more skeptical but saw the practice as harmless fun. Either way, Ouija boards became popular family entertainment. Then in 1973, attitudes abruptly changed in response to the horror film *The Exorcist*, in which a Ouija board enables a demon to "possess" the soul of a young girl. Suddenly, Ouija boards were seen as a terrifying tool of the Devil.

Scientists had another view—since 1852 they had been able to explain the phenomenon of spirit writing. For them, the "supernatural" act of a pointer moving was not the work of spirits but of the ideomotor effect: the living participants subconsciously making tiny muscular movements.

"Ouija, the Wonderful Talking Board [answers questions] about the past, present, and future with marvelous accuracy."

ADVERTISEMENT IN PITTSBURGH TOY AND NOVELTY SHOP, 1891





▲ **Playing with Ouija boards** was a popular pastime, as shown here by two actors during a break on the set of the 1936 film *Human Cargo*.

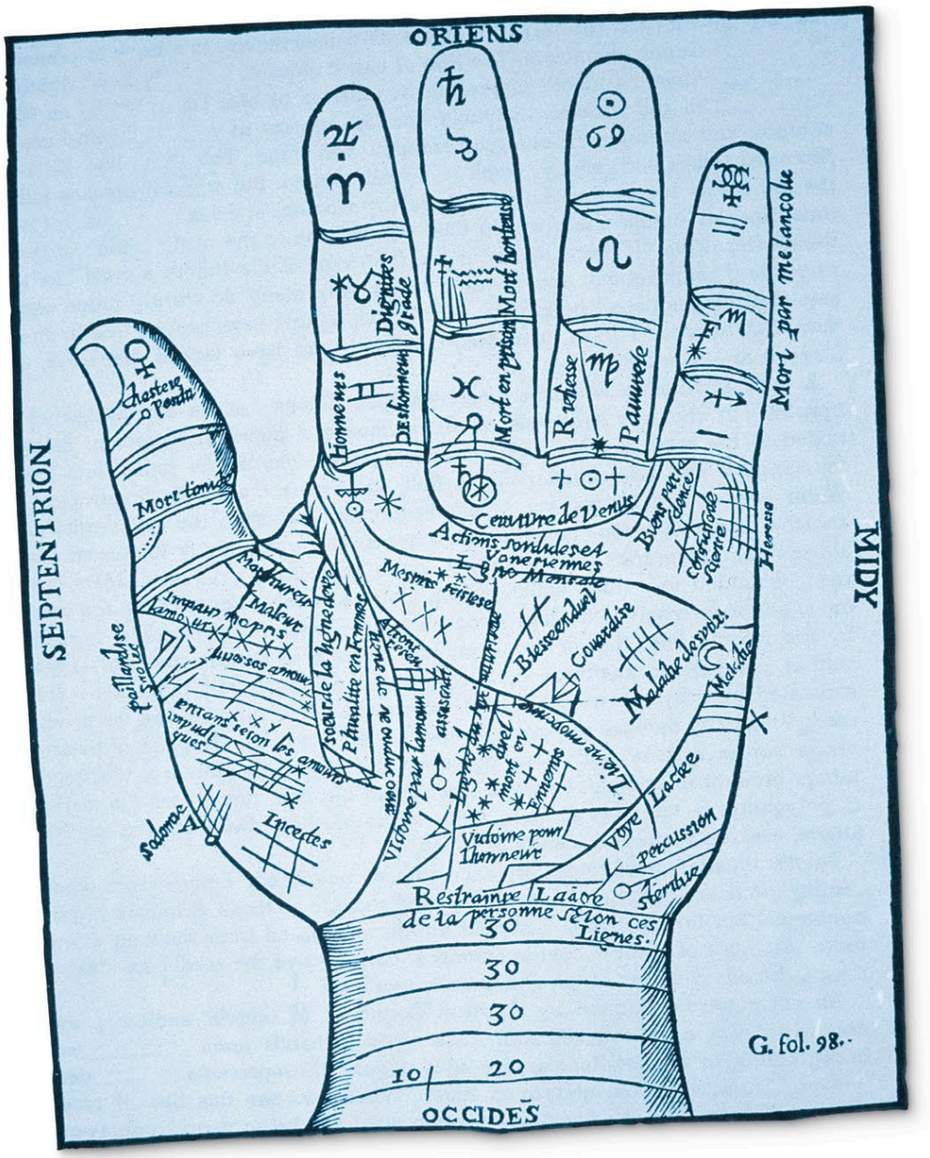
READING THE LINES

palmistry

Also known as chiromancy, palmistry is an ancient form of divination that involves studying the lines and mounds on the palm of the hand. Readings are used to determine an individual's personality traits as well as to make predictions about their future.

Origins of palmistry

One of the earliest records of palmistry dates to around 2,500 years ago in India, where the practice is believed to have originated. From there it spread across Asia and into Europe, and in the medieval period clerics collected many texts on the subject. For several centuries palmistry was used mainly by traveling fortune-tellers, until a revival began in 1839 with the publication of Frenchman Casimir d'Arpentigny's book *La Chirognomie*, which included the first systematic classification of hand types. In the late 1800s, palmistry surged in popularity with the work of Irish astrologer "Cheiro" (see below opposite), and in 1900, theologian William Benham attempted to give it a scientific footing with his book *The Laws of Scientific Hand Reading*.



▼ **The hand of fortune**
This diagram of the zodiacal lines and mounds of the left hand was included in Eliphas Lévi's *The History of Magic* (1860) and originally comes from a text on palmistry written in 1649 by French occultist Jean Belot.

Written in the hand

Typically, palm readers categorize hands into one of four personality types based on the elements: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. The shape of a palm and the relative length of fingers determine which element is dominant: for example, a square palm and short fingers indicates an "Earth" personality (practical and grounded).

Each crease or line in the palm is associated with an aspect of character, and can be read according to the line's length, depth, or arc. There are three main lines: the "heart line" (running below the fingers) relating to the pattern of relationships; the "head line" (moving down across the hand) denoting wisdom or thirst for knowledge; and the "life line" (arcing down to the wrist) indicating health and vitality.

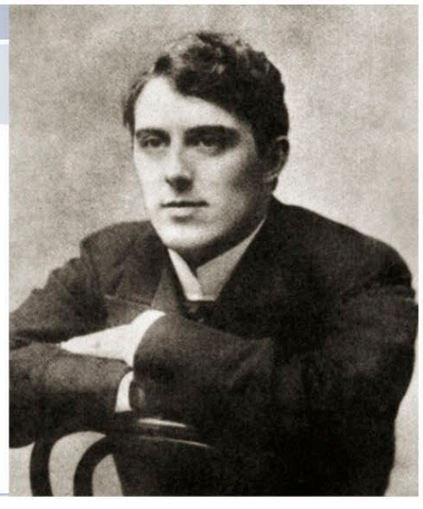
The various mounds and plains on the palm are believed to link to the astrological planetary signs, and their shapes and definition provide further information about a person's character. By studying the pattern of lines and mounds, palm readers hope to divine a person's future.

> "Cheiro exposed my character to me with humiliating accuracy."
>
> **MARK TWAIN**, RECORDED IN A NOTEBOOK, c. 1896

COUNT LOUIS HAMON ("CHEIRO," 1866–1936)

Reading the stars

Born William John Warner, the Irish palmist and astrologer adopted the name Count Louis Hamon, but was often known as Cheiro. After studying chiromancy (Cheiro took his nickname from the alternative spelling, cheiromancy) with gurus in India, he set up a practice in London. His high-profile clients included writers and wits Mark Twain and Oscar Wilde, statesman William Gladstone, actress Sarah Bernhardt, and the Prince of Wales. Famously, Cheiro read the palm of William Pirrie, whose shipyard built the *Titanic*, and is said to have told him, "You will find yourself in a fight for your life," which some have interpreted as a prediction of the *Titanic* disaster.



▲ Fortune-telling
For centuries the practice of palm reading was kept alive by Romany fortune-tellers, and such chiromancy was the inspiration for this 19th-century painting by German artist Theodor Leopold Weller.

CODIFYING REINCARNATION

the birth of spiritism

Like spiritualism (see pp.224–227), spiritism is based on the idea that people's spirits survive after death and can be contacted through mediums. One main difference between the two is that spiritism adds a belief in reincarnation. Today it is often viewed as a branch of spiritualism.



◀ Kardec's creation
La Revue spirite was founded by Kardec in 1858 and became the principal French journal on spiritism and the study of spiritualistic matters. This 1931 edition of the quarterly publication bears a picture of Kardec on its front cover.

Codifying the spirits

The 19th-century French educator Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, better known by his pen-name Allan Kardec, analyzed spiritualist ideas from around the world and organized them into the belief system that became known as spiritism, which combined elements from religion, philosophy, science, and nature. He wrote his "Spiritist Codification"—key works, including *The Spirits' Book* (1857)—in the form of a kind of conversation with spirits.

Kardec shared with Christianity the concept of moral improvement. However, he also believed in reincarnation. He thought that spirits could be good and bad, and that all living things were immortal and they went through repeated incarnations on their journey to greater perfection. Kardec aimed to codify spiritualistic phenomena by applying rigorous, scientific-style inquiry, based on observation and experiment rather than theory. To him, spirits were simply a part of the natural world, acting according to natural laws, and therefore eligible for study just like any other facet of nature.

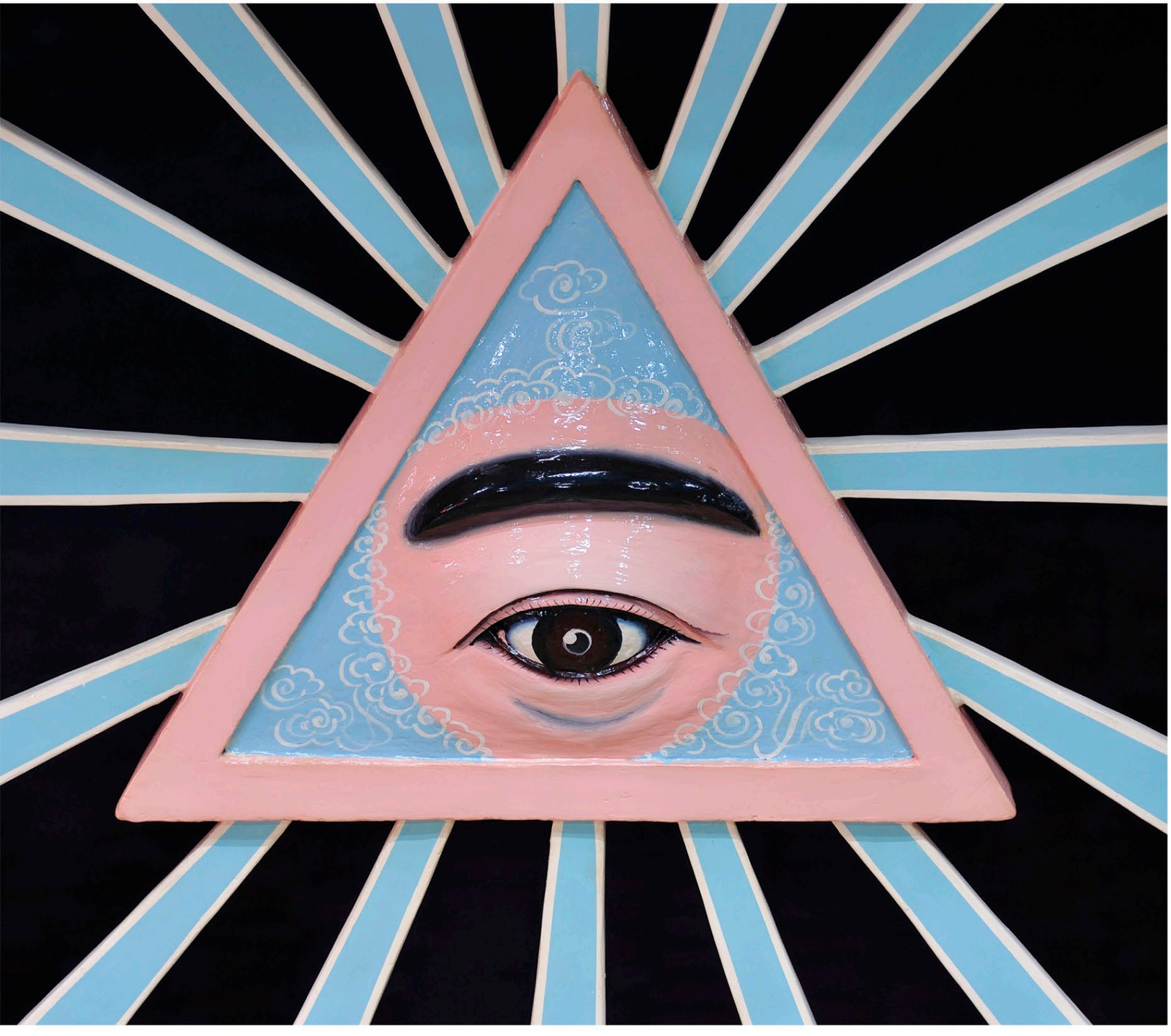
▼ Art magic
This illustration is from William Britten's *Art Magic, or, Mundane, Sub-mundane and Super-mundane Spiritism*, an 1870s work on spiritualism, spiritism, and theosophy that drew on spiritual practices from around the world such as the spinning rituals of these whirling dervishes.



Caribbean connections

Spiritism spread across the world and was especially well received in the Caribbean and Latin America in the late 1800s and the 1900s. Variants emerged, including Santería/La Regla de Ocha, Espiritismo, and Macumba. Macumba developed in Brazil after Africans, enslaved by the Portuguese, arrived there, merging their animism (belief in spirits) with spiritism. The spiritism of ordinary, often rural, people in the Americas came to be allied with witchcraft and the occult by its detractors, and has frequently been denounced by the Christian Church.

In Brazil, forms of spiritist ideas, such as Umbanda and urban Quimbanda, developed, and spiritism merged with traditional folk religion and elements of Catholicism. Brazilian medium Zélio Fernandino de Moraes was a key figure of spiritism, seen as the founder of Umbanda. He formalized Umbanda into the Spiritist Union of Umbanda in 1939 and ran the organization until he died in 1975.



"A spirit's successive corporeal existences are always progressive, and never retrograde …"

ALLAN KARDEC, *THE SPIRITS' BOOK*, 1857

▲ The Divine Eye
Representing the all-seeing eye of the chief god, this is a major symbol of Cao Dai—a religion of Vietnam founded in the 1920s that blends spiritism with Asian and European influences.





▲ Robert-Houdin
This series of woodcuts from 1850 showcases some of Robert-Houdin's famous tricks, including, from left to right, the "garland of roses"; the "horn of plenty"; a mechanical trapeze artist; and the "crystal box trick," in which coins seemed to appear in a box suspended above the audience.

HOCUS POCUS

early stage magic

Two major developments characterized stage magic in the 19th century. Firstly, the kind of popular magic that had been practiced for centuries by itinerant conjurers at fairs and street markets was transformed initially into sophisticated drawing-room entertainments and then, increasingly, into lavish theatrical performances that drew mass audiences. Secondly, its traditional tricks were joined by a throng of new illusions. Spectacular, startling, and improbable, they owed much to presentation—and even more to science.

The father of modern magic

These developments were epitomized by the performances of a Frenchman, Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin, by far the most influential of all 19th-century magicians and not to be confused with his later namesake, Harry Houdini (see p.259). Now known as "the father of modern magic," Robert-Houdin combined great technical sophistication with an effortless instinct for drama. He dazzled crowds across the globe and regularly performed before royalty. A one-time watchmaker, he made props of remarkable ingenuity, such as a magically flowering orange tree and a box that only a child could lift (it was held down by electromagnetism, which had only just been discovered). He was also a brilliant self-publicist, as were a number of his contemporaries: Isaiah Hughes, "the Fakir of Ava"; Scotsman John Henry Anderson, "the Great Wizard



◀ The medium of Inkerman
The meeting of science and magic was precisely encapsulated by Frenchman Henri Robin, who from the 1850s used electrically generated images to create ghostly figures, such as the drummer shown here.





of the North"; John Nevil Maskelyne, who devised the first levitation act and played London's Egyptian Hall for 31 years straight; and Frenchman Alexander Herrmann, "Herrmann the Great," who, complete with an immense curling moustache and goatee, was famed for his version of the bullet catch (a trick that has killed at least 12 magicians to date).

Science and illusion

In 1862, a British scientist named John Henry Pepper stunned audiences at London's Royal Polytechnic by producing a ghost. Three years later he patented his Proteus Cabinet, a staple of stage magic ever since, which involved a figure disappearing and startlingly reappearing from a wooden box—a trick achieved, like the ghost, by the use of mirrors. In the same year Colonel Stodare, "the Summoner of the Sphinx," used the same technique to magically make a living head appear inside a small box. Equally mystifying was the first Vanishing Lady act, which was performed in 1866 by Frenchman Buatier de Kolta and made use of a trapdoor in the stage.

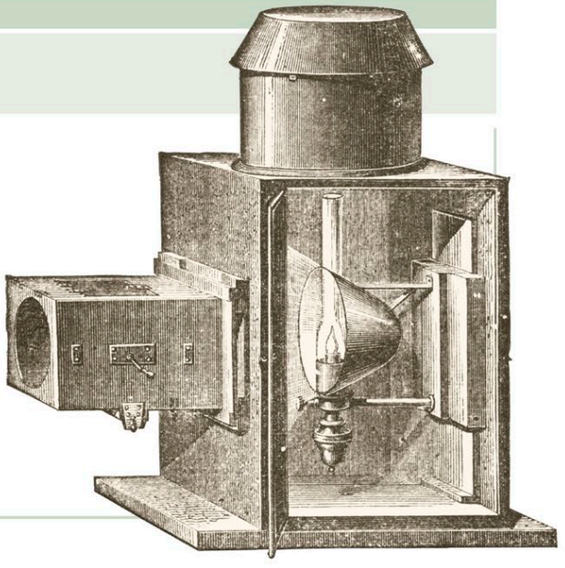
None of this was magic in the supernatural sense. Nevertheless, its blend of science, extreme illusion, and a new kind of showmanship left audiences demanding more.

> "A magician is an actor playing the part of a magician."
>
> **JEAN EUGÈNE ROBERT-HOUDIN**, *SECRETS OF CONJURING AND MAGIC*, 1868

IN PRACTICE

Phantasmagoria

During the mid-18th century, the charlatan Johann Schröpfer used a magic lantern to project images of spirits onto clouds of smoke during séances. Schröpfer's fame was such that Paul Philidor, who first used the technique in a public show in 1790, initially called his illusions "Schröpfer-esque Ghost Appearances." By 1792, however, he had named them *phantasmagorie*. A Belgian, Etienne-Gaspard Robert, perfected the art a few years later, and phantasmagoria became a popular feature of 19th-century stage magic.



The wonder of optics is shown in this German magic lantern, 1872.



▲ Magical energy points
Blavatsky's theosophy took inspiration from earlier works such as *Theosophia Practica* (1696). This illustration from the book shows the bodily *chakras*, the energy points described in Buddhism and Hinduism.

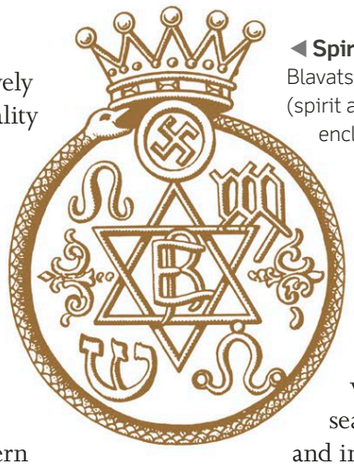
"Error runs down an inclined plane, while Truth has to laboriously climb its way uphill."

HELENA BLAVATSKY, *THE SECRET DOCTRINE*, 1888

DIVINE WISDOM

theosophy

While the details of theosophy are complex, its basic tenet is comparatively simple—there is a single spiritual reality that can only be reached through deep contemplation, a power latent in all humans. Late 19th-century theosophy had much in common with other contemporary religious societies interested in magic, but it also incorporated Buddhist beliefs. It epitomized the era's fascination with the occult and was hugely influential, bringing Eastern ideas to the West and spawning hundreds of like-minded movements.



◀ Spiritual symbolism
Blavatsky's brooch had her initials in a hexagram (spirit and matter intertwined) under a swastika, enclosed by an *ouroboros*, a symbol of infinity.

Core belief in universality

The Theosophical Society was founded in New York in 1875 by a Russian emigree, Helena Blavatsky. In 1879, Blavatsky went to India and three years later she transferred the headquarters of the burgeoning organization there. At the same time, a branch opened in London, and further branches followed across Europe and the US. The rich blend of ideas from the East and West reinforced the theosophical creed of unity—there is a universality that binds humanity and infuses a higher understanding of who and what people are. Theosophy was a search for an absolute truth, timeless and infinite, or in Blavatsky's words, "a sense of being part of all that is."

In 1885, the London Society for Psychical Research sensationally accused Blavatsky of being a fraud, a charge that ended her association with the movement. Theosophy continued to thrive, however, under the new direction of feminist and champion of Indian nationalism Annie Besant. It still flourishes in the 21st century, especially in Europe and the US. Its core beliefs remain unchanged—that all life is interconnected and continuous; that human existence can only be understood through intense study of the occult and its ritual practices in order to reach a state of higher consciousness; and that the ultimate goal, guided by truth, is a state of wholeness. There is no one path, but there is always only one goal.



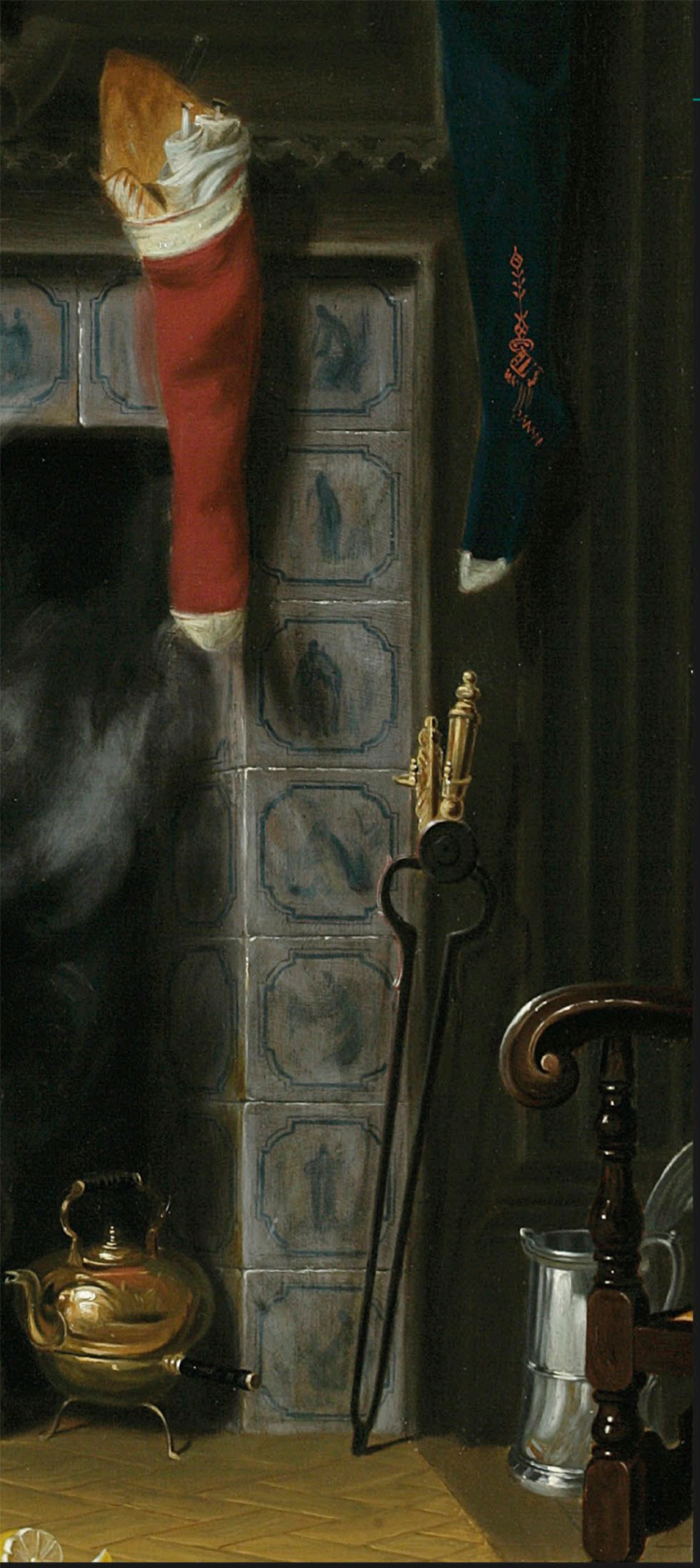
▲ Helena Blavatsky
A charismatic Russian-born American theosophist, Blavatsky was hailed as a spiritual leader although her critics denounced her as a charlatan. She became a recluse and spent her final years in contemplative solitude in London.

▼ Headquarters in India
Helena Blavatsky set up the headquarters of the Theosophical Society in Adyar in southeast India around 1882, where it was well placed for the study and comparison of religions.





▲ **The mischievous, chubby figure of Father Christmas** pauses by the chimney in this 1837 painting by Robert Weir.



The spirit of Christmas

The personification of Christmas magic, Father Christmas represents a fusion of modern commercialism and Christian belief. He originated in medieval Europe, where the 3rd-century St. Nicholas (bishop, gift bringer, and patron of children) gradually became a mythical figure associated with Christmas. St. Nicholas was believed to have miraculous attributes, including the power to travel across the sky, delivering gifts to children in many places at once.

In Northern Europe, less saintly versions of St. Nicholas, such as Britain's Father Christmas and the Germanic Christkind, emerged during the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. These figures often had supernatural assistants (most famously elves), as well as the ability to know whether children had been good or bad.

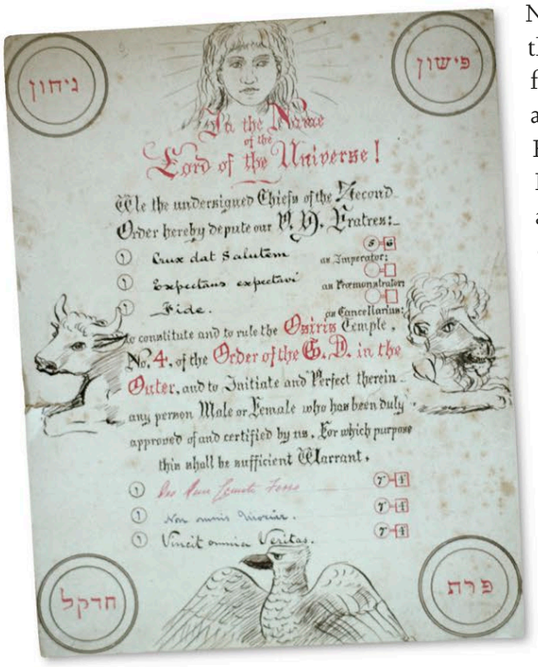
The modern Father Christmas—or Santa Claus, from the Dutch Sinter Klauss (short for Sint Nikolaas)—was created in 19th-century America. In the 1823 poem *'Twas The Night Before Christmas*, "St. Nick" has eight flying reindeer and can magically descend and ascend a chimney. Commercial advertising, notably from Coca-Cola in the 20th century, cemented this version of Father Christmas in popular culture. Taking different forms around the world today, he still delights children who long to believe in his magic.

"... Laying his finger aside of his nose, And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose ..."

CLEMENT C. MOORE, "'TWAS THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS," 1823

THE HERMETIC ORDER OF THE GOLDEN DAWN

occult science, mystery, and ritual magic



▲ **Official charter**
Drawn up by Moina Mathers (née Bergson) in December 1888, this charter officially established the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. It was signed by all three founders: Mathers, Westcott, and Woodman.

No spiritual movement encapsulated the late 19th-century Western fascination with the occult, magic, and ritual more precisely than the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Founded in 1888, it offered a complex, scholarly program of initiation, study, and spiritual growth, yet in its early form it barely lasted 15 years, torn apart by bitter disputes.

Striving for spirituality

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was established by the Englishmen William Woodman, Samuel Mathers, and William Westcott. All three were Freemasons (see pp.194–197) and immersed in almost every strand of Western mystery tradition and ancient magic. The aim of the Order was to pull these strands into a coherent form and to achieve new levels of spiritual perception through the disciplined practice of ritual magic. For members, the path to mystical awakening was akin to a form of alchemical purification: base physical matter transmuted into new spiritual gold.

Initiation and ritual

Members hoped to achieve this spiritual awakening partly by invoking angels and archangels, gods and goddesses, and elemental spirits, and partly by taking part in elaborate Egyptian-influenced rituals charged with magical meaning and complete with fantastical costumes, backdrops, and props. This theatrical aspect of the movement was particularly evident in the initiation ceremonies, in which initiates were bound to a cross and made to swear allegiance to the Order, while robed figures performed undisclosed ritual acts around them.

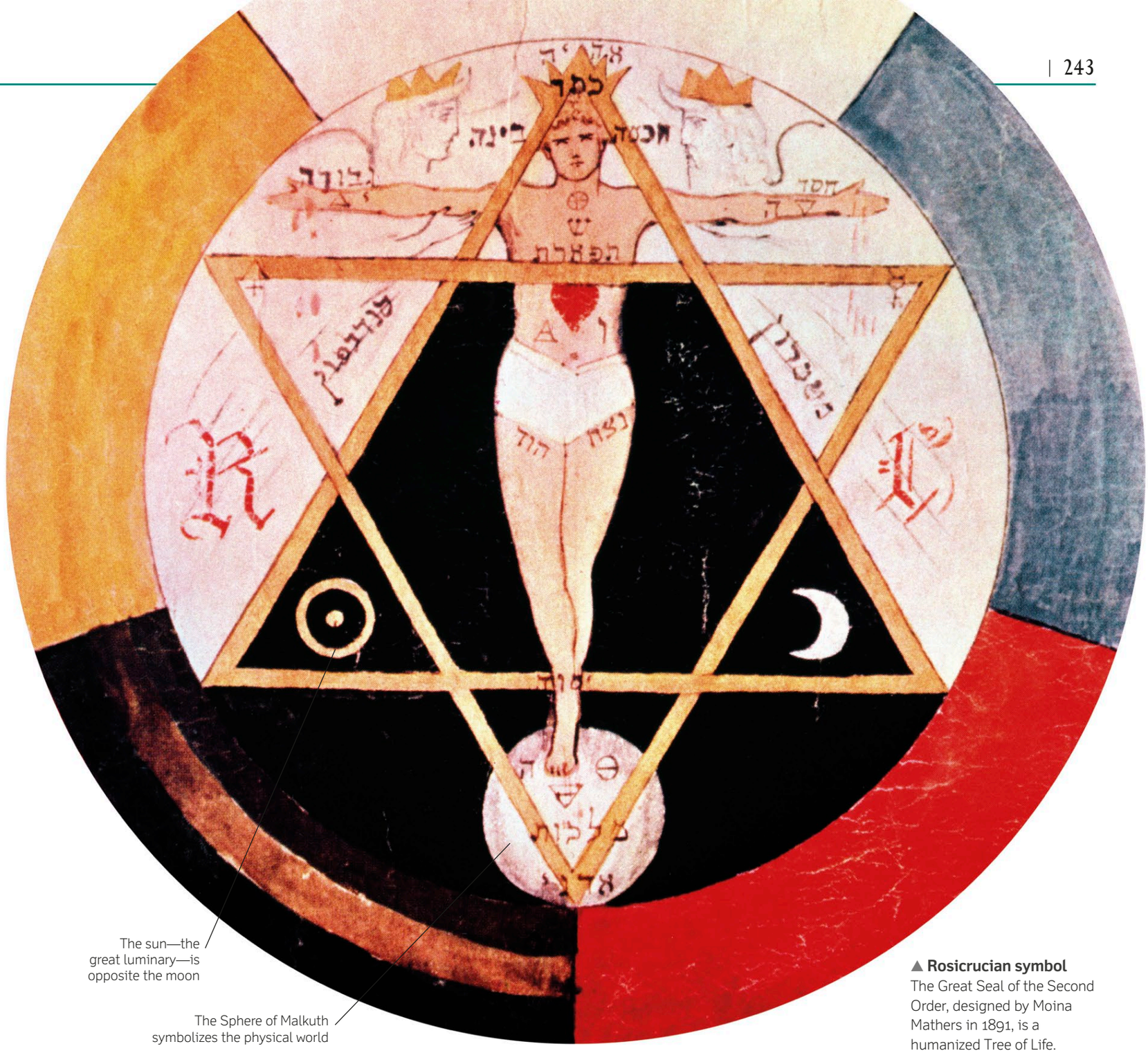
A secretive society, the Order jealously guarded details of its practices, and initiation was by invitation only. A member's journey to a higher spiritual plane involved passing through three spheres of consciousness and growth—a structure that mirrored that of the kabbalistic Tree of Life



▶ **Ceremonial regalia**
Painted here by his wife Moina in the full ceremonial regalia he wore for magic rituals, Mathers was the driving force of the Golden Dawn. However, he was so eccentric that he was expelled from the Order in 1900.

"Vestigia Nulla Retrorsum [Prudence never retraces its steps]."

MOTTO OF **SOROR V.N.R.**, PEN NAME OF MOINA MATHERS (NEE BERGSON)



▲ Rosicrucian symbol
The Great Seal of the Second Order, designed by Moina Mathers in 1891, is a humanized Tree of Life. The central figure within a pentagram is supported by archangels; the outer bands represent the elements: water, fire, earth, air, and spirit.

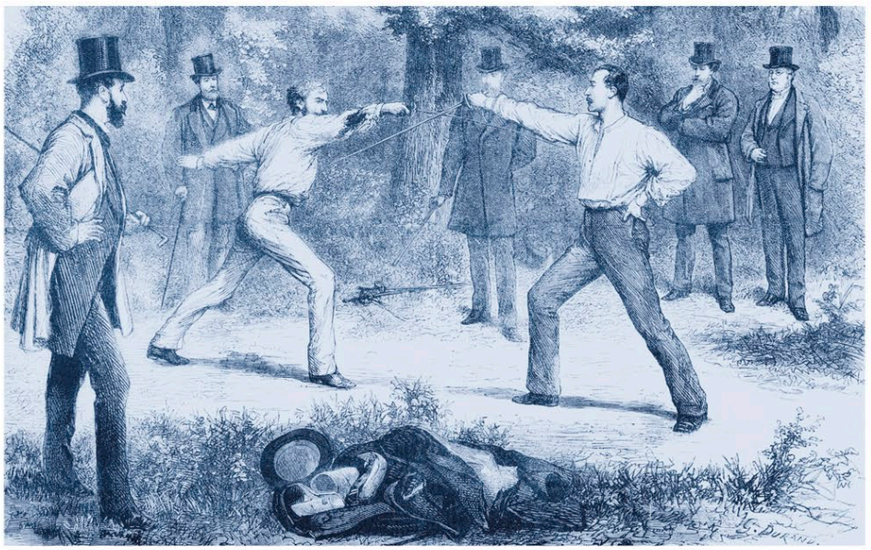
(see pp.136–139). The first sphere was a psychic world called the Golden Dawn; practical magic began in the second (the Red Rose and the Cross of Gold); and the third was the world of the divine (the Secret Chiefs).

Decisive women

The Order of the Golden Dawn appealed to a privileged and artistic group. Unusually for the time, it regarded men and women as equal; the contributions of its female members had a significant influence over this new world of high magic. Male members included authors Bram Stoker and Arthur Conan-Doyle and the poet W.B. Yeats, while the Order's women included theater patron Annie Horniman, who pioneered the British repertory movement; Irish revolutionary Maud Gonne; actress Florence Farr; and painter Moina Bergson, who married founder Samuel Mathers in 1890 and later became high priestess of the Order. With its remarkable members, the Order kept going until the 1970s.

SYMBOLISM AND MYSTICISM

magic in turn-of-the-century France



▲ Parisian duel
This 1875 engraving depicts a duel over outraged honor. Journalist and "Notorious Satanist" Henri-Antoine Jules-Bois and Stanislas de Guaita fought a duel after Jules-Bois wrote a damning article about de Guaita. Neither was hurt as the pistols misfired; in a second duel between Jules-Bois and Papus, both men suffered minor saber wounds.

The occult revival that swept Western Europe after 1880 began in Paris at the same time as the French city emerged as the art capital of the world. Paris was a cultural melting pot of painters, musicians, poets, writers, magicians, and spiritualists—a collection of creative but argumentative individuals whose combined energies alternately synergized and caused clashes over competing ideas.

A number of Parisian figures led the occult revival, absorbing existing beliefs, such as Rosicrucianism, the Kabbalah, and Freemasonry, as well as the ideas of the recent theosophical movement in the US (see pp.238–239). The French occult scholar and writer Eliphas Lévi was also a significant influence.

"Prince of the Rosicrucians"

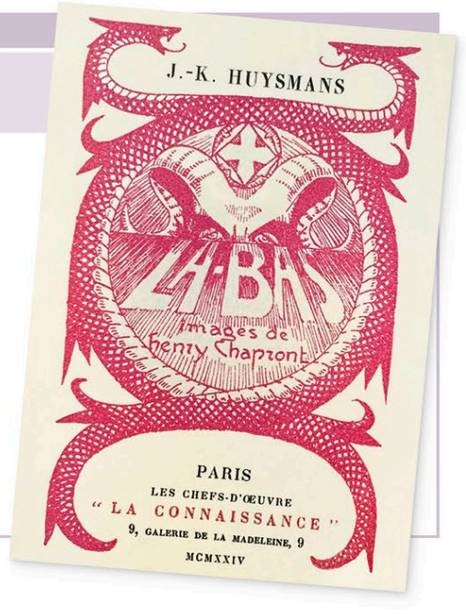
Italian-born poet Stanislas de Guaita, dubbed "Prince of the Rosicrucians" for the breadth and depth of his occult learning, was the leading light. His home in Paris became a meeting point for like-minded people to discuss esoteric and mystical ideas. De Guaita launched the occult society l'Ordre Kabbalistique de la Rose-Croix in 1888—the same year that the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was founded in London (see pp.242–243).

Two friends backed de Guaita's initiative: Gérard Encausse (see p.257), a physician and occultist who worked under the name Papus and established Martinism (a form of Christian mysticism), and Joséphin Péladan, a fellow Martinist and writer who became increasingly controversial and egotistical. In contrast to the theosophists, who

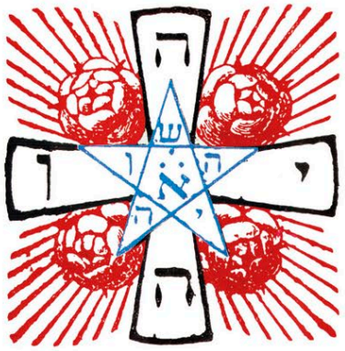
IN CONTEXT

Delving into satanism

J.K. Huysmans' novel *Là-bas* ("Down There," referring to Hell) bore fictionalized similarities to a real-life feud between Stanislas de Guaita and defrocked priest Joseph Boullan, in which each man accused the other of directing harmful magic at them. In the novel, the protagonist's research into alchemy leads him into the satanic underbelly of 19th-century France. Rumor had it that Boullan had sacrificed his own child in a black mass, an episode described with gory relish in the book. One character in *Là-bas* says: "From exalted mysticism to raging Satanism is but a step."



Huysmans' controversial novel of 1891, *Là-bas*, explored Satanism.



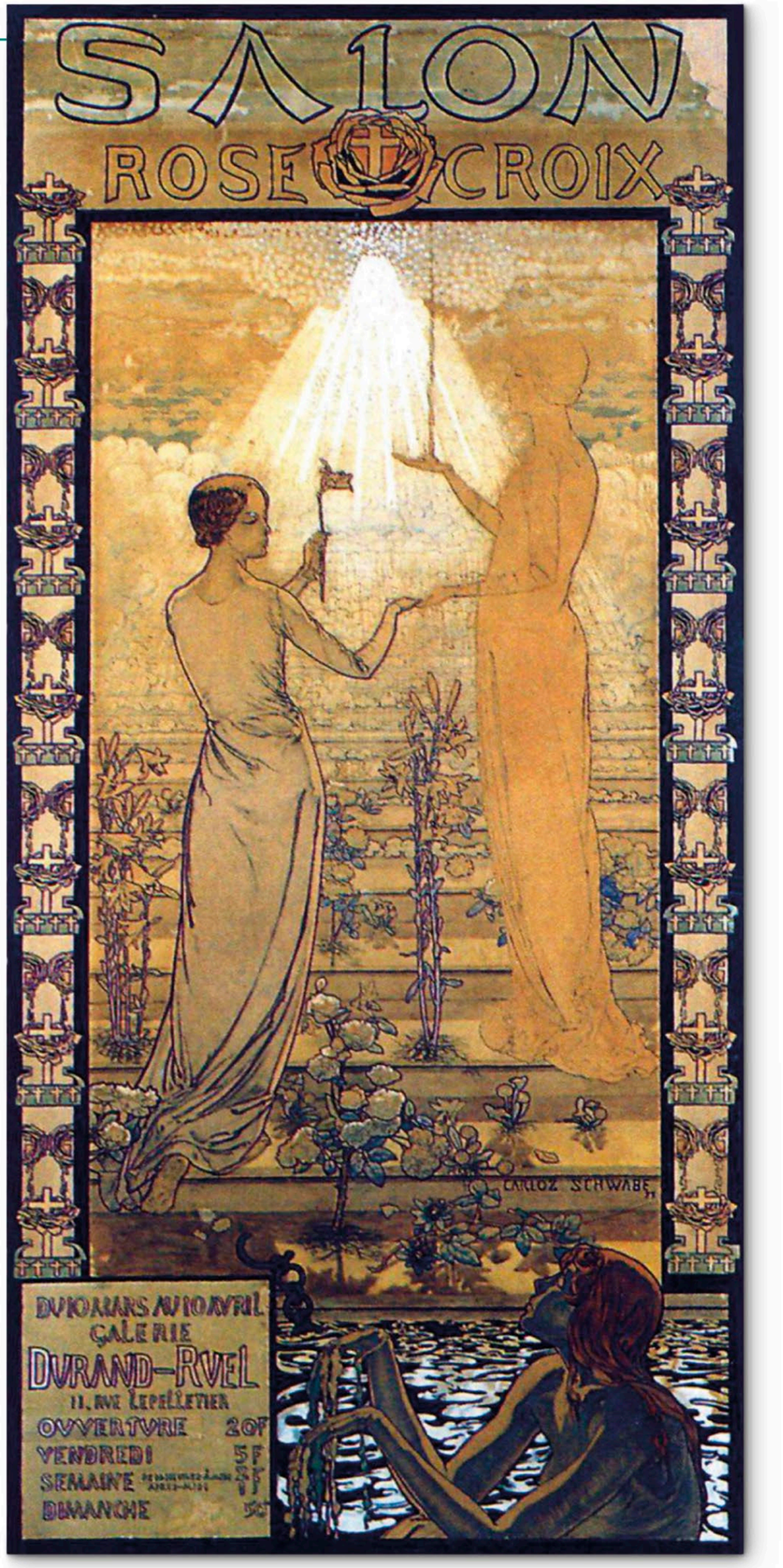
◀ Rose and cross
The symbol was designed by de Guaita in 1888. The Hebrew characters in the cross arms spell God; those in the pentagram arms spell Joshua. In the center is the letter "A" meaning Adam.

were drawn to non-Western faiths such as Buddhism and Hinduism, the focus of de Guaita's order was on spiritual enlightenment through a new understanding of Christian beliefs.

Symbolism and magic

De Guaita's society proved short-lived. Just as the Golden Dawn splintered in acrimony, so, after only two years, de Guaita's new order was riven in two. In 1890, Péladan, a devout Catholic, broke away not just from the Martinists but also from de Guaita. He established a rival body, the Ordre du Temple de la Rose + Croix, to revive the lost art of magic. Péladan's eccentricities alienated many, yet he possessed a genius for uniting figures of the Symbolist movement, who mingled spirituality with despair at the modern world in their work, and whose artistic views accorded with his own.

Péladan was both lampooned as a showman-fraud and admired as the authentic heart of late 19th-century French mysticism. He called himself "Super Magician" and "the Imperator" and opened one lecture with the words: "People of Nîmes, I have only to pronounce a certain formula for the earth to open and swallow you all." His fame peaked in 1892 when he launched a series of exhibitions of Symbolist work. Symbolist poets Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine, composers Claude Debussy and Erik Satie, and artists such as Fernand Khnopff and Arnold Böcklin all came under Péladan's promotional wing.



▶ Salon de la Rose + Croix, 1892
Figures greet a new dawn in this poster for the first of six annual artistic exhibitions organized by Joséphin Péladan. The Salons celebrated his Rose + Croix order as well as the creative work of those involved in the Symbolist movement.





MODERN MAGIC

1900 ONWARD

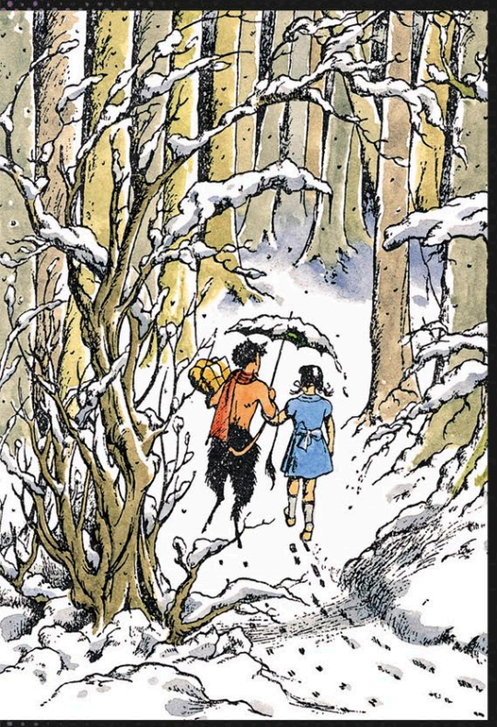
Introduction

Magic in the 20th and 21st centuries has taken many forms. As the authority of mainstream religious organizations has waned in many places, smaller-scale faiths have played a part in the growth of new magical practices and beliefs. The relationship of science and magic continues to fascinate people, and magic has become a subject for sociological, anthropological, and psychological study. As access to information and like-minded individuals online becomes ever simpler, practical magic today can be carried out with ease, personally or collaboratively.

Early 20th-century magic was marked by two developments. The first, which had begun in the late 19th century, was the spread of ceremonial magic across Germany, the UK, and France. This Western magic was at its most esoteric and spiritual, indebted to ancient lore and wedded to elaborate ritual. The goal of practitioners was enlightenment through understanding a divine unifying principle, but the means were not always orthodox. The most notorious magician, Aleister Crowley, took up depravity and wickedness with orgiastic relish.

The second development was the growing impact of mass media. Even before World War I, Harry "Handcuff" Houdini—easily the 20th century's most celebrated magical performer—drew immense crowds, the result of blanket press coverage as much as of his own showmanship. Magic in numerous guises became a staple of the cinema and, later, of television, winning huge new audiences. Screen depictions of magic have broadened its appeal to that of mass entertainment, whether in fictional story lines or as virtuoso performances of illusion, humor, or physical endurance.

Modern magic looks both into the distant past and to the future. The rediscovery and celebration of forms of pagan magic has been dubbed Neopaganism.



The world of Narnia *see p.262–63*



Wiccan pentacle *see p.265*



Medicine man's hand drum *see p.281*

The best-known form is Wicca—modern witchcraft drawing loosely on a pre-Christian era. Its growth from the 1950s spurred an interest in ancient beliefs and practices that have spawned movements such as Neoshamanism and Stregheria. All Neopagan orders champion oneness with the natural world, and most are peaceable (apart from a few groups who promote a far-right agenda). Some modern offshoots are professedly self-serving, notably Satanism and Chaos Magic, both intent on personal fulfillment.

Movements that look to the future are loosely known as New Age, or Mind, Body, and Spirit—the pursuit of mental and physical harmony through holistic means such as yoga, meditation, crystal healing, and color therapy. The resulting whole is a form of updated folk magic, which aims to heal what practitioners see as the unnatural excesses of the 21st century. New Age has a natural counterpart in a new type of millennial witch: a self-proclaimed activist sisterhood of technopagans empowered by social media.

"Words and magic were in the beginning one and the same thing, and even today words retain much of their magical power."

SIGMUND FREUD, *INTRODUCTORY LECTURES ON PSYCHO-ANALYSIS*, 1922



Peruvian healer's vision *see p.283*



Satanic Baphomet statue *see p.288*



African Voodoo dancer *see p.293*



▶ **The cult magician**
Crowley craved notoriety, and in 1923 an English newspaper named him "the wickedest man in the world." He is shown here wearing his "headdress of Horus," styled on the ancient Egyptian god Horus.

MAGICK OF THE BEAST

Crowley and the Thelemic religion

The controversial British occultist Aleister Crowley developed Thelema, his own belief system, in the early 1900s, having utterly rejected Christianity. Thelema (the Greek word for "will") drew on many spiritual and esoteric traditions, such as Kabbalah (see pp.136–139), Rosicrucianism (see pp.154–157), and goetia (see p.142). Famous for both his debauchery and his self-indulgence, Crowley encouraged Thelemites to engage in ritual, and sometimes erotic, magick (he used the variant spelling to distinguish his magic from conjuring).

Pathway to paradise

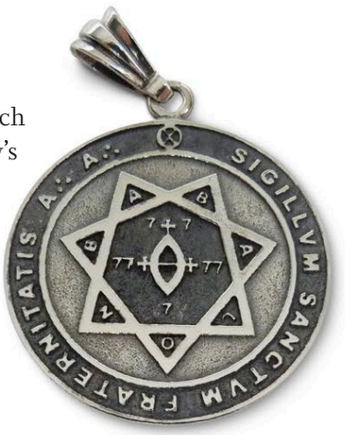
In 1898, Crowley had joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (see pp.242–243). He had wanted its rites and esoteric magic to reveal a world inhabited by demonic and ethereal beings—manifestations of a universal truth—but his hopes were dashed.

The revelation Crowley sought was soon to come. In Cairo in 1904, he claimed he was visited by a Holy Guardian Angel, Aiwass, an ancient Egyptian spirit, who dictated the text that became *The Book of the Law*: the cornerstone of his new religion, Thelema. Crowley saw himself as a Thelemic prophet, whose role was to guide humanity into the Aeon of Horus (the third Aeon in the Thelemic version of history, and the one in which humanity was to take control of its own destiny).

Crowley promoted Thelema through the A.·.A.·. (Astrum Argenteum, or Order of the Silver Star), a group he founded as a successor to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. In 1910, he also became part of the Ordo Templi Orientis (see p.253), which adopted Thelema as its religion and used Crowley's Thelemic Gnostic Mass as its central ritual.

The future of Thelema

By 1920, Crowley had a headquarters—the Abbey of Thelema—in Sicily. There, he built a spiritual community focused around ritual magick, the importance of personal will, and sex. He considered sexual energy to be a source of magical power that could be used in Thelemic rituals to align participants with their true will. Crowley had long delighted in the scandal that his hypersexuality provoked in the pious Victorian world, but it led to his expulsion from Sicily in 1923. However, neither this nor his death in 1947 ended Thelema, which is still practiced today.



▲ **Astrum Argenteum seal**
The seven-pointed star—a seal of Crowley's A.·.A.·. group—represents both masculine and feminine. The spiritual organization was founded by Crowley in 1907.



▶ **Ritual magick**
Crowley, here performing rites, knew the impact of complex ritual on magical spiritual development—the Gnostic Mass (see p.253) involved at least five ceremonially clad celebrants.

"Do what they wilt, shall be the whole law. Love is the law, love under will."

ALEISTER CROWLEY, *THE BOOK OF THE LAW*, 1904



▲ **Pagans' Gate**
The triumphal arch (the Heidentor) at Carnuntum, in modern-day Austria, signified Roman rule to Guido von List. In 1875, he honored an old Roman defeat at the site by burying eight wine bottles in the shape of a swastika under the arch. List's adoption of the swastika as an Aryan symbol paved the way for its later use by the Nazis.

MAN IS ONE WITH GOD

the German occult revival

In the 19th century, nationalist sentiment spread across much of Europe. Its primary results were political: Germany was unified into a formalized empire in 1871, and Italy became one kingdom around 1870. As a secondary outcome, in the German-speaking world, nationalism sparked a renewed interest in a supposedly lost aspect of German culture—mythic, pre-Christian paganism, a tradition that celebrated the expression of what its admirers considered to be true German virtues. At the same time, a revival of occult practices, which emphasized ancient spiritual and magical learning, found adherents in Germanic countries, as well as in other parts of Europe.

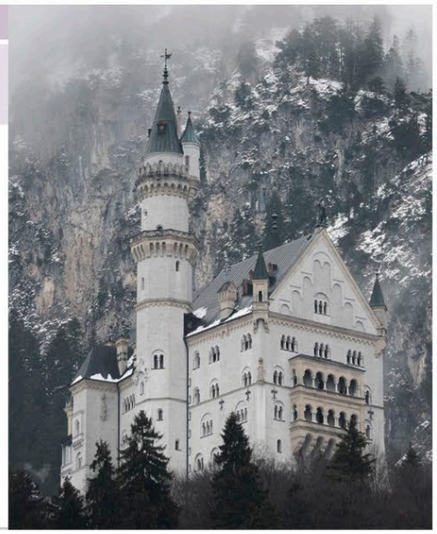
Paganism and mysticism

The central figure in the promotion of Germanic pagan heritage was an Austrian poet and occultist, Guido von List. A champion of Norse mythology, List became a devotee of Wotan (or Odin), the god of war

IN CONTEXT

Romantic background

List's work inspired a surge of interest in German mythology, not just among Nazis. The musical genius Richard Wagner created the most lasting artistic expressions when he fused Germanic myth with opera in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* ("The Ring Cycle"), an epic cycle of four operas (which Hitler saw as a supreme demonstration of German greatness). The Bavarian king, Ludwig II, also an admirer of Wagner, recreated his mythical operatic world in fairy-tale medieval-style castles perched on romantically forested mountainsides.



Neuschwanstein Castle, Bavaria, commissioned by Ludwig II and completed in 1886, was inspired by Richard Wagner's *The Ring Cycle*.

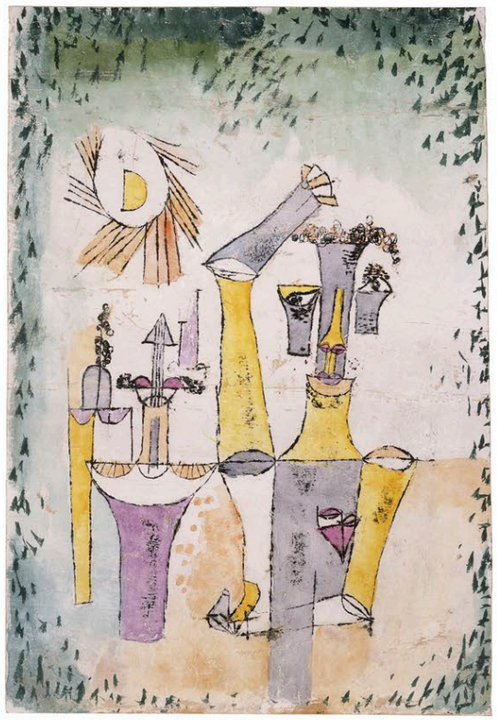
and wisdom and the father of Thor. List promoted Wotanism, a religious movement that he believed revived the values of pre-Christian German people. List was driven by his *völkisch* (nationalistic) belief in a Germanic community of racially pure Aryans who, he claimed, had been suppressed by Christian teaching. Such theories, far from historically accurate, were later adopted by the Nazis.

From 1902, the occult, particularly the religion of theosophy (see pp.238–239), increasingly colored List's Germanic nationalism. He was a strong advocate of the power of runes (see pp.68–69), and claimed that his intuitive readings of runes allowed him to access hidden knowledge about Germany's pagan past. He also believed that World War I would herald the emergence of a new, Aryan German empire.

Spiritual brotherhood

In contrast with List's focus on Germanic paganism, the goal of the Ordo Templi Orientis was a fusion of all higher magical learning and the creation of a brotherhood to spread spiritual and philosophical knowledge. Created in 1902 by two Germans, Carl Keller and Theodor Reuss, it embraced every form of occult teaching, from Freemasonry and the Kabbalah to Rosicrucianism. The order aimed to enable people to gain an ultimate understanding of existence, the universe, and spirituality. From 1910, it was dominated by Aleister Crowley (see pp.250–251), who merged it with his own religion, Thelema, and wrote its Gnostic Mass, which combined Thelemic ritual with some of the structures of the Catholic Mass. Such rites were led by ministers of the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica, an arm of the Ordo Templi Orientis that operated as a church. Unlike its near-contemporary, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (see pp.242–243), the Ordo Templi Orientis still survives today.

▼ **Esoteric art**
This 1920 watercolor by the Swiss painter Paul Klee, entitled *Black Magic*, is thought to depict the artist as a magician. The German occult revival inspired many artists, and some critics claim that Klee's work was influenced by Spiritualism (see pp.224–227).



"Our Order possesses the key which opens up all Masonic and Hermetic secrets …"

THEODOR REUSS, *ORIFLAMME*, 1912



▲ For a general reading or to answer a specific question, a single stone may be selected randomly from a pouch or the stones can be cast on a cloth.

Runes for divination

Runes are symbols that were once used by the Vikings and other Germanic peoples. They are a kind of alphabet with, typically, 24 letters, each with its own phonetic sound, but each rune also has a symbolic significance linked to Norse mythology. Runes may have been tools for communication in general usage, but they were also employed to tell fortunes, cast spells, and provide protection. Experts cast rune stones for divination, but the stones had further magical uses. Divination was just the first step: "Let no man carve runes to cast a spell," said one Viking, "… save first he learns to read them well."



▲ **Fehu (F)** means cattle, and wealth and success earned through effort. Reversed, it means failed plans.



▲ **Uruz (U)** is the aurochs, a now-extinct giant ox. It means brute strength, willpower, and the security of home.



▲ **Thurisaz (TH)** stands for the giants of Norse mythology. It means seeing the future or discovering the truth.



▲ **Ansuz (A)** represents Odin. It usually means listening to one's inner voice or taking advice from others.



▲ **Raidho (R)** means a long journey—whether actual travel or metaphorically of the soul, or of healing.



▲ **Hagalaz (H)** means hail or a storm of missiles in battle, and the destructive forces of nature beyond human control.



▲ **Nauthiz (H)** is need or necessity. It signifies caution, or awareness of just how bad things are.



▲ **Isa (I)** represents ice. It means frozen in time, or putting everything on hold for a period of reflection.



▲ **Jera (J)** is harvest or the cycle of the year. It means finally reaping the rewards of labor at the right time.



▲ **Eihwaz (EI)** is yew, the sacred tree used to make wands. It means doing the right thing, or patience.



▲ **Tiwaz (T)** represents the war god Tyr and was carved on weapons. It means motivation and transcendence.



▲ **Berkana (B)** stands for the birch tree and Idun, the goddess of spring and fertility. It means preparing the ground.



▲ **Ehwaz (E)** is the sacred horse. It means bringing things into balance or focusing on the tools needed for progress.



▲ **Mannaz (M)** represents humankind. It signifies one's place within humanity and a reflective state of mind.



▲ **Laguz (L)** is water, or a body of water, and signifies feminine energy or cleansing of the spirit.



▲ **Rune stone casting** is much more than looking up the symbols in a book. The direction of the stones and the pattern they create as they fall can make a big difference to the interpretation.



▲ **Kenaz (K)** is a torch or beacon. It is a sign of hope in dark times, an opening when things are blocked.



▲ **Gebo (G)** is a sacrifice to the gods. It means giving up the self to be in harmony with one's surroundings.



▲ **Wunjo (W or V)** is comfort, joy, or glory. It means needing no one else for happiness and serenity.



▲ **Perthro (P)** is linked to the phoenix and suggests the unknown. It signifies letting go, death, and rebirth.



▲ **Algiz (Z)** is defense or protection. It means making the right connections after clarifying one's thoughts.



▲ **Sowelo (S)** stands for the sun. It means wholeness or the completion of a circle, or awareness of one's dark side.



▲ **Inguz (NG)** can be the mythic hero Ing, or the Danish people. It means the blessing of human connection.



▲ **Dagaz (D)** is day or daylight. It means starting a new chapter, seeing the light, or trying new ideas.



▲ **Othila (O)** is inheritance: passing on knowledge or wealth, or native land. It means freedom and independence.

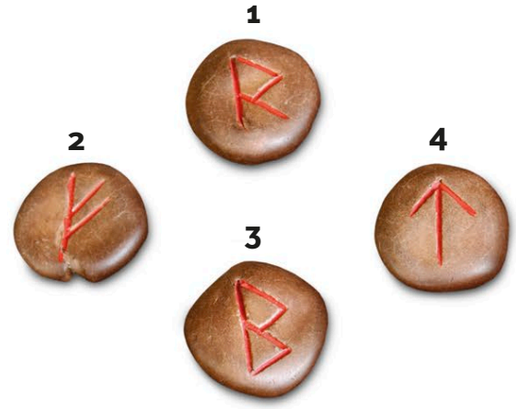
Reading runes

For a wider reading, or to look in depth at a particular issue, a spread of three, four, five, or more runes can provide greater detail. There are many ways to interpret the stones, and the order in which to do so can vary, too.



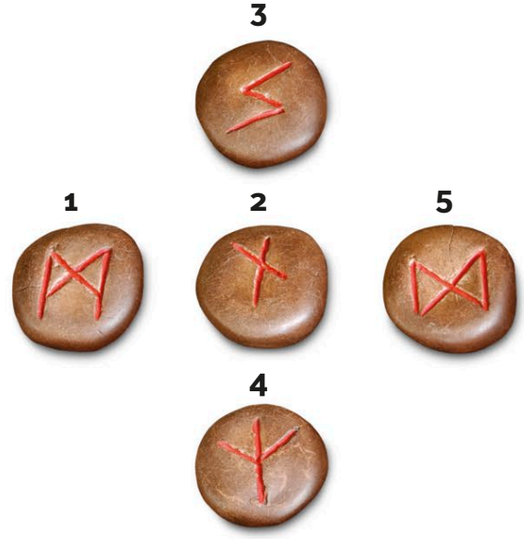
Three-rune spread

1 Past An action or problem **2 Present** The challenge and what course of action is best **3 Future** The outcome if action is taken



Four-rune spread

1 Past Issues, desires, or influences **2 Present** The situation or problem **3 Possibilities** Good and bad options **4 Future** The desired outcome



Five-rune spread

1 Past Causes of the current situation **2 Present** Good or bad issues **3 Solutions** Guidance and help that can be expected from other people **4 Problems** Obstacles in the way of the solution **5 Future** The predicted outcome

SPIRITUAL OCCULTISTS

early 20th-century magical societies



▲ **Glastonbury Tor**
Glastonbury in southwest England became central to Dion Fortune's pursuit of mysticism. In 1924, she opened a spiritual retreat here, called Chalice Orchard.

During World War I, a young woman named Violet Mary Firth underwent an astonishing transformation. She was English, she lived in London, and she had a conventional upbringing. However, while training as a psychologist, she discovered a mystical, psychic world that changed her life. Firth became a proponent of the occult beliefs and esoteric thought that grew across Western Europe from the later 19th century. Her conviction was total—she was certain that she was connected to a wisdom of the ages, part Christian, part psychic, and that she had been reincarnated multiple times.

Dion Fortune

In 1919, Violet Firth reemerged as Deo Non Fortuna (By God, Not Chance), shortened to Dion Fortune. That same year she became a member of the Theosophical Society (see p.239). Like her fellow members, she was convinced that she was in contact with the Ascended Masters (reincarnated enlightened beings). In a vision she even saw one of these beings, the "Master Jesus, Lord of Compassion," guiding her to her own higher spirituality.

Fortune wrote numerous books, including guides to practical magic, an explanation of Kabbalah (see pp.136–39), and occult novels. Her greatest legacy, however, was the Society of the Inner Light, which she founded in 1927 in London.

Magic and mysticism

Dion Fortune was not alone. Besides belonging to the Theosophical Society, she was inspired by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (see pp.242–243). After that broke up acrimoniously at the end of the 19th century, Samuel Mathers founded the Rosicrucian Order of Alpha et Omega; his wife, artist-occultist Moina Mathers, directed it from 1918. Fortune joined the Order in 1919. Like members of the Fraternitas Saturni, launched by Eugen Grosche in Germany in 1926, Alpha et Omega members thought that magic and an understanding of the divine were the pathways to spiritualism.

Two further major esoteric movements, the Martinists, founded in France in 1889 (see pp.244–245), and the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, created in England in 1915, were no less interested in the pursuit of divine origins and powers. However, they placed a premium on mysticism rather than magic. Both movements were explicitly Christian and believed in spiritual contemplation as the way of entering into the heart of God, and both continue to exist today.



GRIGORI RASPUTIN (1869–1916)

Mystic healer or charlatan?

At the same time as the spiritual developments of 19th-century Europe, the occult and alternatives to the Russian Orthodox Church, such as theosophy, fired the imaginations of the aristocracy in St. Petersburg. In 1903, Grigori Rasputin, born to a Siberian peasant family and claiming to be Christ reborn, entered high society in Russia's capital, and from 1905 he began to gain the trust of the Czarina. To her, Rasputin, with his claims of mystic healing powers, seemed the only hope for her hemophiliac son, Alexei. Rasputin was a bizarre character, a sexual predator driven by a belief in his own sanctity. His murder—he was poisoned, then shot, and eventually drowned—was as controversial as his life.

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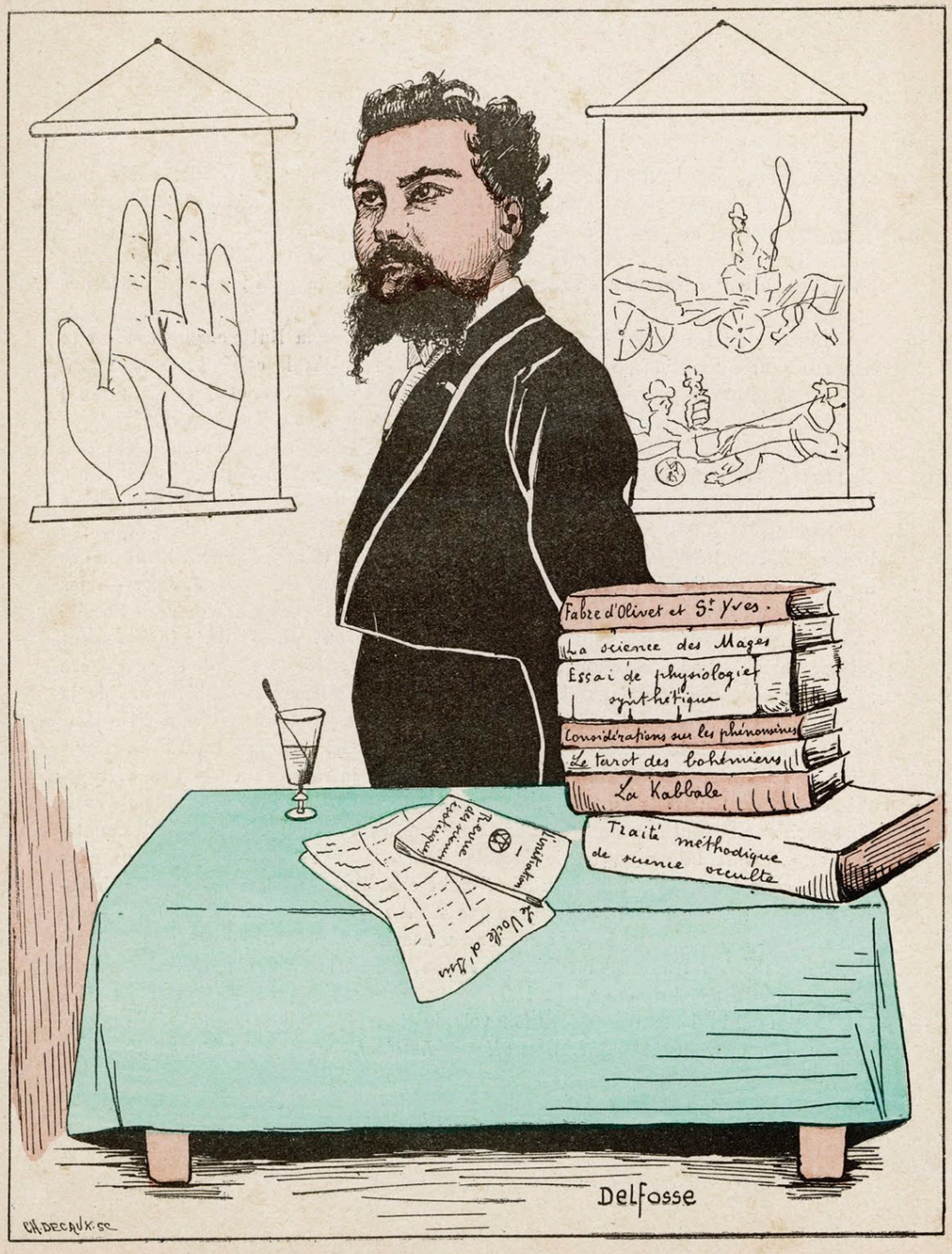
LES HOMMES D'AUJOURD'HUI

DESSIN DE DELFOSSE

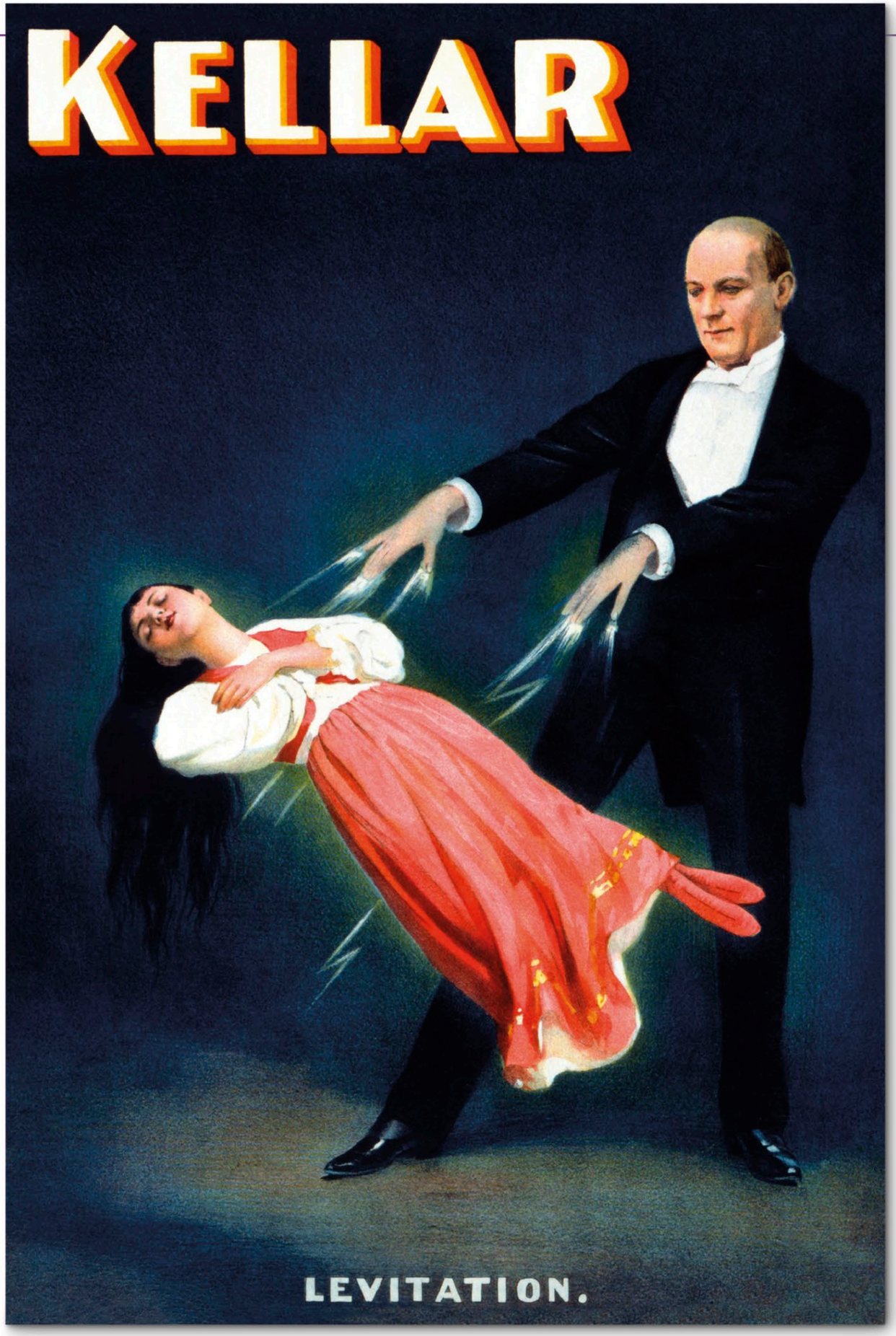
TEXTE DE M. HAVEN

Bureaux : **Librairie Vanier, 19, quai Saint-Michel, Paris.**

PAPUS



◀ Martinist meeting room
A prime mover behind late 19th-century Europe's occult revival was the French doctor called Gérard Encausse, who took the name Papus, meaning "physician." He founded the Martinists and is depicted here in the society's meeting room.



▶ **Seeing is believing**
One of Kellar's most famous illusions, "The Levitation of Princess Karnac," involved a hidden hydraulic lifting device under the "levitating" woman. Kellar's panache as a performer was key to the illusion's success—the audience had to believe.

CONJURING TRICKS

magic takes center stage

Magic as performance was given a vast boost in the mid-1800s by Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin (see pp.236–237), and continued to flourish into the next century. This was a golden age of magic: a big business, it filled theaters and its prime practitioners were celebrated. Magic had become spectacle, with the inexplicable made real in ever more dramatic ways. Never less than a series of elaborate illusions, performances placed an absolute premium on the magician as conjurer of the impossible.

Applause and acclaim

One central figure was Harry Kellar, an American magician who seemed to his audience to be in touch with the spirit world. In the late 1800s, he became the first stage magician to achieve international fame. A Chinese illusionist, Ching Ling Foo, also gained great acclaim; in his act he appeared to bring the beheaded back to life, to push blades through his nose without injury, and to produce a variety of animals—even children—from under a black cape.



▲ **The original Chinese conjuror**
Many of Beijing-born Ching Ling Foo's illusions were variations on Chinese magic. The air of mystery they produced entranced huge numbers throughout the US and Europe.

▶ **Dicing with death**
Houdini reveled in the notion that his apparently impossible challenges might prove fatal: in this famous stunt, he escaped from a straitjacket while suspended upside-down from a crane in New York.

Houdini supreme

Increasingly, the thrill of many acts lay not only in the conjurer's skills but in the miraculous avoidance of death. No magician encapsulated this better than Hungarian-born Harry Houdini. Showmanship personified, Houdini was an adept escapologist and technician who delighted in the impossible. His most famous acts demanded astonishing physical feats, but they were still tricks. In time, he became a firm opponent of false mediums who sought to pass themselves off as genuine.

Sleight of hand

In the early 20th century, two masters emerged in one of the oldest forms of performance magic—*legerdemain* (sleight of hand). Welsh-born Richard Pitchford (stage name "Cardini") could produce, as if from nowhere, vast numbers of playing cards arranged in perfect fans. Slightly later, American magician Channing Pollock was the original exponent of the dove fluttering from a silk handkerchief. No one presumed such feats were actual magic, but they rarely failed to astound.

> "What he did seemed impossible. Was he really nothing more than a mere illusionist?"
>
> **RUTH BRANDON**, *THE LIFE AND MANY DEATHS OF HARRY HOUDINI*, 1993



▲ **Breaking boundaries**
Through his work with the people of the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski laid the foundations of modern social anthropology. He published his research in the 1920s.

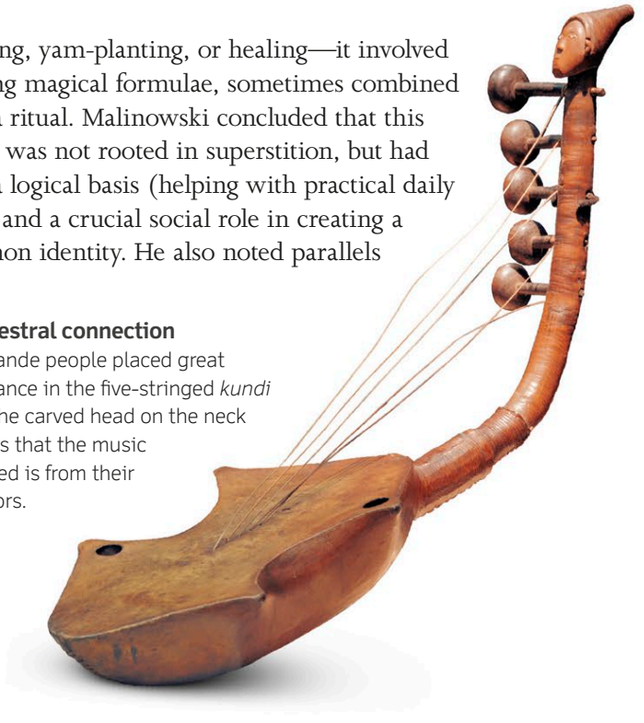
BEYOND SUPERSTITION

the colonial anthropologist

For anthropologists in the late 19th century, the use of "ritual magic" by tribal societies marked them out as less developed than their Western counterparts—a view that is now considered both outdated and racist. Anthropology (the study of human societies) was then a relatively new and evolving discipline, and ideas about tribal ritual radically altered during the 20th century.

In the field

In 1915, the Polish-born anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski began his fieldwork. His results dramatically changed anthropologists' views on the practice of magic. Studying the Trobriand islanders of Melanesia (part of Oceania), he lived among the people for several years, spoke their language, and observed their customs. Magic was widely practiced by islanders, and—whether applied to canoe-building, yam-planting, or healing—it involved reciting magical formulae, sometimes combined with a ritual. Malinowski concluded that this magic was not rooted in superstition, but had both a logical basis (helping with practical daily tasks) and a crucial social role in creating a common identity. He also noted parallels



▶ **Ancestral connection**
The Azande people placed great importance in the five-stringed *kundi* harp. The carved head on the neck signifies that the music produced is from their ancestors.



JEANNE FAVRET-SAADA (b. 1934)

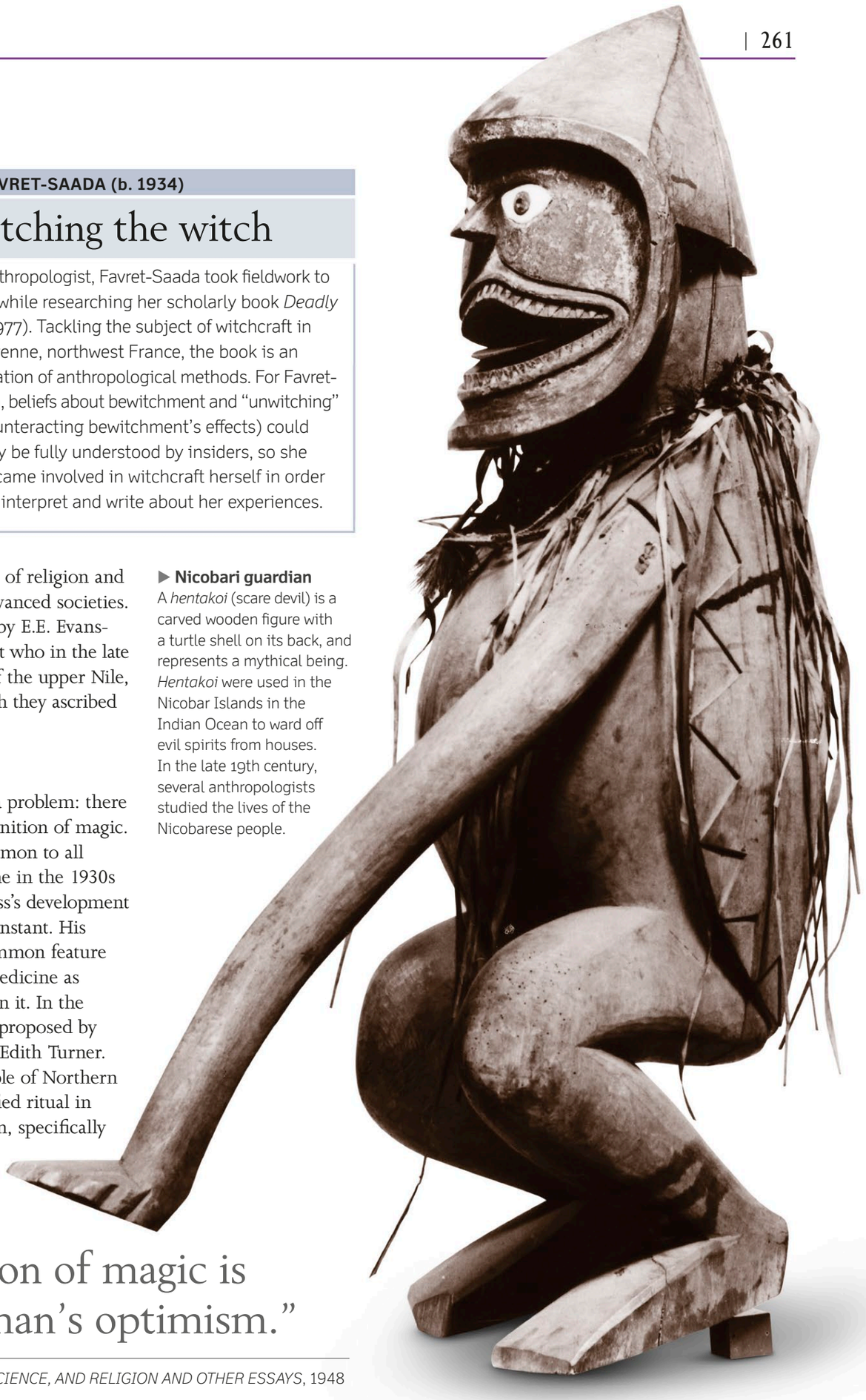
Unwitching the witch

A French anthropologist, Favret-Saada took fieldwork to a new level while researching her scholarly book *Deadly Words* (1977). Tackling the subject of witchcraft in the Mayenne, northwest France, the book is an exploration of anthropological methods. For Favret-Saada, beliefs about bewitchment and "unwitching" (counteracting bewitchment's effects) could only be fully understood by insiders, so she became involved in witchcraft herself in order to interpret and write about her experiences.

between the role of magic and that of religion and science in more technologically advanced societies. Malinowski's work was continued by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, an English anthropologist who in the late 1920s studied the Azande people of the upper Nile, with a focus on witchcraft, to which they ascribed all misfortune.

Magic and structuralism

Early anthropological work raised a problem: there was no agreed anthropological definition of magic. Did it have universal elements common to all societies? One possible answer came in the 1930s with Frenchman Claude Lévi-Strauss's development of the idea of magic as a human constant. His approach was that the essential common feature of magic—applicable to modern medicine as much as to shamanism—is belief in it. In the 1950s, a further characteristic was proposed by English anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner. Their work with the Ndembu people of Northern Rhodesia (modern Zambia) identified ritual in magic as a means of social cohesion, specifically in resolving disputes peacefully.



▶ Nicobari guardian
A *hentakoi* (scare devil) is a carved wooden figure with a turtle shell on its back, and represents a mythical being. *Hentakoi* were used in the Nicobar Islands in the Indian Ocean to ward off evil spirits from houses. In the late 19th century, several anthropologists studied the lives of the Nicobarese people.

"The function of magic is to ritualize man's optimism."

BRONISLAW MALINOWSKI, *MAGIC, SCIENCE, AND RELIGION AND OTHER ESSAYS*, 1948

Magic and the fantasy novel

Although the first modern fantasy novels were written in the 19th century, the genre reached maturity in the mid-20th century with the publication of what are now some of its best-known works—all of which have magic at their hearts. The most celebrated of these is J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of The Rings*. Like Tolkien's earlier book, *The Hobbit*, it conjures a world of people and elves, dwarves and hobbits, wizards and wraiths.

Also set in a magical place, C.S. Lewis's seven-volume series *The Chronicles of Narnia* explores magical dangers and wonders in Narnia, a land of fauns and a wicked White Witch, entered through a magical wardrobe. Unlike Tolkien's works, however, the Narnia titles are set only partly in this fantasy world—a characteristic they share with J.K. Rowling's renowned *Harry Potter* series. C.S. Lewis chose Pauline Baynes, who had illustrated some of Tolkien's books, to provide the drawings for the whole series.

The otherworldly settings, enchantments, and mythical beasts common to fantasy novels can often be traced back to earlier myths, legends, or fairy tales. For instance, T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, a set of four books published together in 1958, is based on the myth of King Arthur and his court, Camelot. This vivid legend of magic, love, betrayal, and downfall was first written down during the medieval period (see p.110).

"Do not cite the Deep Magic to me, Witch. I was there when it was written."

C.S. LEWIS, *THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE*, 1950





▲ **Lucy and the Faun** walk in Narnia in a scene from C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* in an illustration by Pauline Baynes.

WICCA AND WITCHCRAFT

witches in the modern era



▲ **Cycle of the seasons**
This wheel of the year includes symbols of the changing seasons, such as spring flowers, the summer sun, and a plentiful harvest, which reflect the continuous cycle of death and rebirth.

Named after the Anglo-Saxon word for "witch," Wicca is also called witchcraft or even just The Craft. It is one branch of Neopaganism (see pp.272–275), movements that have adapted old beliefs to modern times.

Wicca takes its cue from the lore and magical practices of almost every age, but as a religion it is less than 100 years old. It was founded in England in the 1940s by an eccentric English former colonial civil servant named Gerald Gardner (see below). He claimed that Wicca was the direct descendant of pre-Christian pagan beliefs. In reality, however, many of its rituals and teachings were created by Gardner himself. Wicca has no central core of established religious practice so, as it has spread around the globe, it has taken on many forms. These are united only by a shared belief in the benign divinity that inhabits the whole of nature, the idea of magic, and the central creed of "harm none," meaning do only good. However, sometimes the practice parts company with the theory, as in, for example, the number of Wicca Internet hexes (curses, see pp.300–301) put on political candidates.

Benign magic in nature

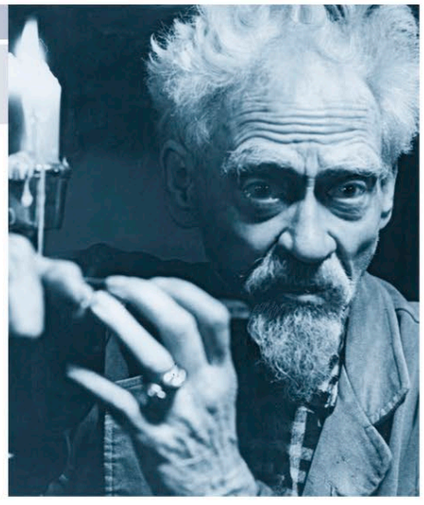
Wicca is generally dualistic (believing in two equal gods). The male deity is often represented as the Horned God. His most obvious manifestation is the sun, a symbol of life and action. The female deity, Mother Goddess or Gaia, the Greek earth goddess, is symbolized by the moon, an emblem of emotion and intuition. By extension, the passage of the seasons, the equinoxes and the solstices, and the waxing and waning of the moon (symbolic

> "The first time I called myself a 'Witch' was the most magical moment of my life."
>
> **MARGOT ADLER**, WICCAN PRIESTESS, IN *DRAWING DOWN THE MOON*, 1979

GERALD GARDNER (1884–1964)

Father of Wicca

The founder of modern witchcraft, Gardner spent much of his life in Malaya, where the native veneration for magical practices made a lasting impression on him. In Dorset in the late 1930s, he claimed to have been initiated into a local witches' coven, and he subsequently gave his life over to the furthering of witchcraft. Gardner wrote a series of books that had popular appeal, and he had an instinct for publicity. By the early 1960s, he had achieved the seemingly impossible—the acceptance of witchcraft as an attractive belief chosen as a result of its psychological, social, and community benefits.





of women's monthly cycles) dictate special times of worship. Followers of Wicca identify with the natural world in the belief that we are all a divine aspect of it. Divinity, as defined by the wonders of nature, is as much in all our beings as it is in every river, mountain, tree, and animal. Magic in the sense that the world, and the universe, is inherently magical remains a basic Wiccan belief. The original Gardnerian Wicca, as it became known, had rules for ritual initiations, but later versions were more fluid in their understanding of magic. As a 21st-century Wiccan put it: "The fact that the sun rises every morning and we are here to see it is magic." Apart from the creed of "harm none" and magical celebration of the natural world, sub-group after sub-group has broken off from Gardner's original vision. The first to challenge him, in the 1950s, was one of his disciples, Doreen Valiente. Her purpose was not to dispute Gardner's vision but to purify it. Other rival cults followed.

▲ **The mystical pentacle**
The five points of the pentacle, also called a pentagram, represent earth, water, air, fire, and spirit. Its circle suggests wholeness and unity with the natural world.



▲ **Wicca wedding**
Since the late 1960s, handfastings (Wiccan weddings) have become more popular. This couple were conjoined in 2008. The priest wore a ram's horns to signify the Horned God.

As Wicca has evolved, most of Gardner's instructions—such as his assertion that "to work magic you must be naked"—are no longer followed, but some practices remain. The first is the creation of a circle, marked out by sprinkling exorcised water, by an athame (dagger), or by candles. Inside the circle, the worshippers believe that they can separate themselves from the material world. While chanting spells, charms, and incantations (many introduced by Doreen Valiente); making potions; and dancing, participants use a variety of objects to enhance the ritual: crystals, candles, herbs (especially potent), incense, oils, and tarot cards.

These rituals have links to the High Magic of the Freemasons (see pp.194–197) but also to the practices of cunning folk and folk magic. Today, rituals can take on whatever meaning their practitioners choose, provided their intentions are benign.

Ever-growing appeal of magic

The global appeal of Wicca has been extraordinary. It has overcome the common presumption of witchcraft as dark and sinister, and as the exclusive preserve of women. Wicca attracted the counterculture of the 1960s, and it has since chimed with the nonjudgmental values of

▼ **Spiral dance**
Spiritualist Miriam Simos, better known as Starhawk, inspired the performance of the first spiral dance in 1979. This joyous affirmation of pagan feminism is held every year at Samhain (Halloween), especially in the US.



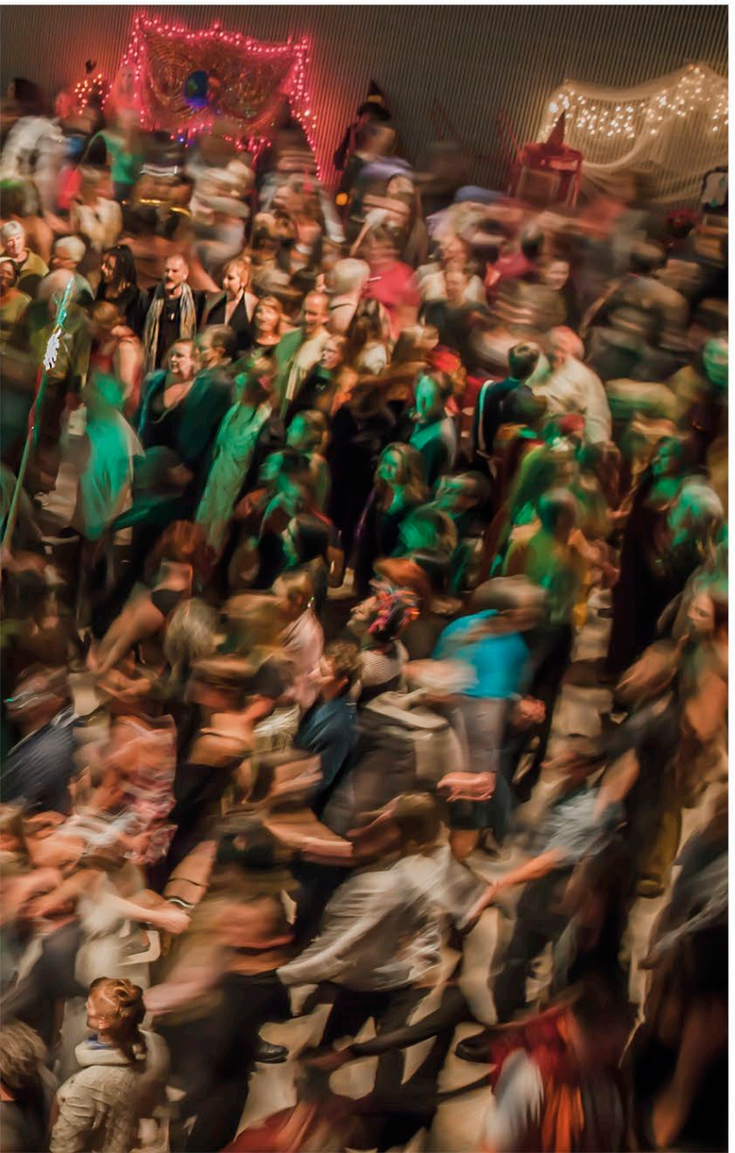
IN PRACTICE

Rituals and celebration

Modern Wiccan rituals can take on almost any form according to the particular tastes of any given coven and what is being commemorated. The most common rituals are those that celebrate the Sabbats: the solstices, the equinoxes, and the "cross-quarter days" that fall between them. Worshippers often create lavish displays of seasonal foliage and flowers, and they may recite prayers and poems for healing or merely to reflect the blessings of the seasons. Participants always invoke the God and Goddess and the four elements, and sometimes a fifth: Akasha (the spirit). They may call upon the four cardinal points, too.



A woman sets up an altar to celebrate a Wiccaning (the blessing of a baby recently born to Wiccans).



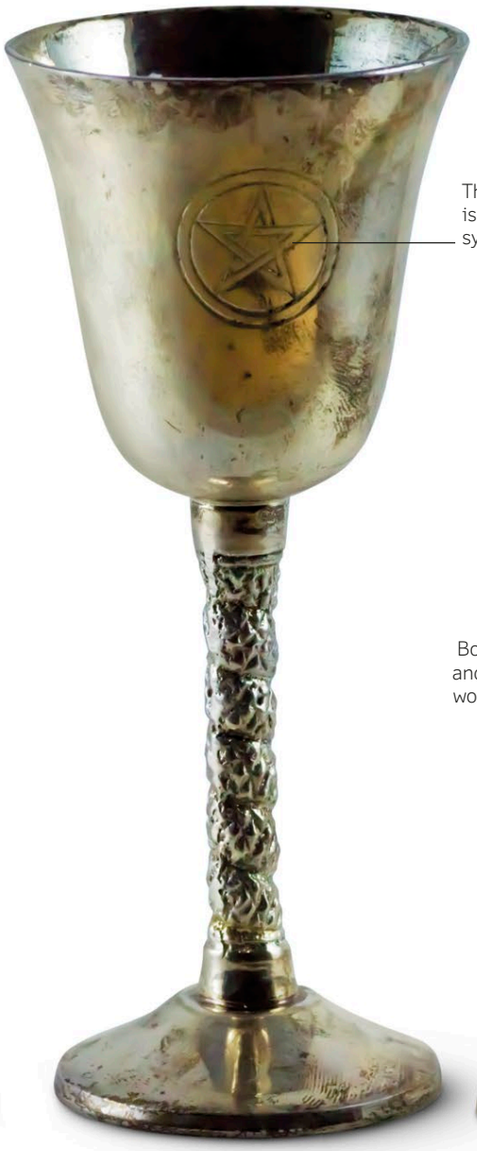
21st-century millennials. It is also open to endless reinterpretation. In North America, it was first championed by British-born Raymond Buckland; in 1964, he proclaimed himself the first Wiccan in the US, simultaneously asserting the primacy of Anglo-Saxon influence on Wicca. In the 1970s, an American journalist, Margot Adler, was equally influential in spreading the Wiccan creed. At around the same time, also in the US, Hungarian-born Zsuzsanna Budapest championed Wicca as a mainstay of feminism, and only worshipped female deities. Since then, Norse Wicca, Celtic Wicca, Druidic Wicca, Solitary Wicca, and Eclectic Wicca have also emerged. Among the most vocal Wicca champions are environmentalists.

It is estimated that today there are as many as 1.5 million Wiccans in the US alone. Whatever its journey from Gerald Gardner's imagined world of the occult in the 1940s, modern witchcraft remains an extraordinary testament to a continuing human need for—and belief in—magic.

> "The Goddess is alive. Magic is afoot."
>
> **ZSUZSANNA BUDAPEST**, WICCAN AUTHOR, 2010

Wiccan tools

Special magical tools were first listed by the English Wiccan Gerald Gardner. Wiccan branches today select the tools that work for them, usually for altar rituals inside a magic circle to intensify spiritual (or "psychic") energy and help achieve a direct connection with the divine. This connection gives the tools a divine power, which is shared with their user during magical rituals.



▲ **Chalices** represent the Wiccan Goddess's womb and are filled with water, wine, ale, or herbal infusions depending on the ritual.



▲ **Bells** are mostly used by Wiccans to focus attention or attract energy. According to Gardner, each ritual called for a specific number of knells.



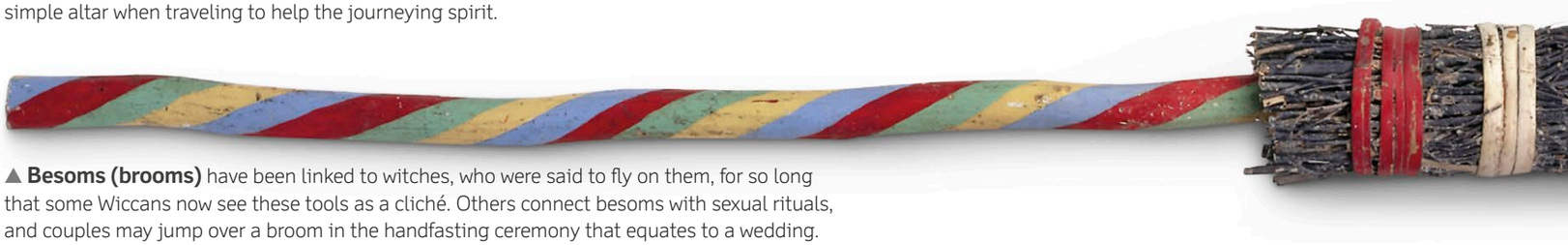
▲ **Ritual scourges** are used only in some strands of Wicca as a symbol of the sacrifice and suffering initiates must undergo in order to learn more about witchcraft.



▲ **Athames (ritual knives)** are associated with the spirit of fire or air. They are used to cast a magic circle and direct energy inside it, never to draw blood.



▲ **Stangs (horned staffs)** are topped with antlers that represent the Wiccan Horned God. A stang can be used as a simple altar when traveling to help the journeying spirit.



▲ **Besoms (brooms)** have been linked to witches, who were said to fly on them, for so long that some Wiccans now see these tools as a cliché. Others connect besoms with sexual rituals, and couples may jump over a broom in the handfasting ceremony that equates to a wedding.



▲ **Candelabra** and candles are said to represent the God and Goddess. They are usually set on either side of the pentacle (right), or somewhere near the center of the altar.



▲ **Cauldrons** have long been part of the culture of witchcraft for making and boiling potions. Some Wiccans today see them as more of a fantasy object than a tool.



▲ **Pentacles** symbolize the earth. For Wiccans, a pentacle is a sign or sigil—commonly a pentagram within a circle—that is used as a tool to bless the altar and concentrate magical energy within it.



▲ **Wands** are used to direct energy and draw magic circles, but in a more gentle manner than athames. A wand is often used in rituals to invoke the God and Goddess.



▲ **Incense burners** are a useful tool because incense is a key part of Wicca, as of many religions. Wiccan practitioners use aromas of herbs, spices, oils, resins, and tree barks to create a state of mind ready to commune with the spirit world.



▲ Sicilian Demeter
This 6th-century BCE Sicilian bust shows Demeter, mother of Persephone, who presided over the endless round of life and death. She is claimed as a part of the Stregheria pantheon.

THE "OLD RELIGION"

Stregheria

The Italian-American witchcraft movement, Stregheria, claims to hark back to an imagined Italian folk tradition with roots in the pre-Roman, pre-Christian Etruscan people of central Italy in the first millennium BCE. According to Stregheria, the Etruscans' belief system survived Roman repression and assimilation as a deeply rooted peasant tradition brought to light only at the end of the 19th century. It is as a result of these purported ancient roots that Stregheria is also known as *La Vecchia Religione*, the Old Religion.

The spiritual inheritance

Stregheria is based on the 1899 publication *Aradia or the Gospel of the Witches* (see below), which allegedly contains the sacred text of a pagan Italian witch cult. The forms of worship it describes—veneration of male and female deities and the natural world and its seasons, and celebration of equinoxes and solstices—resemble those of Wicca (see pp.264–267).



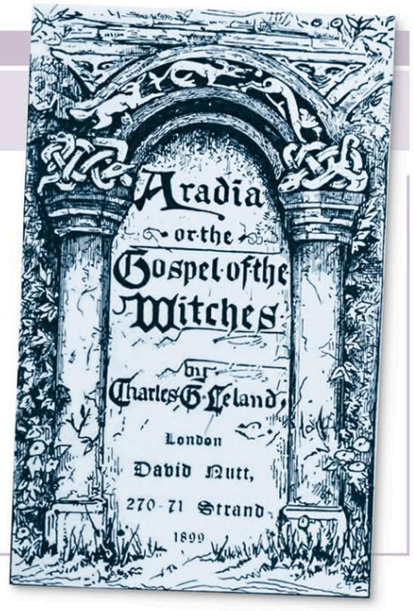
▶ **Etruscan Diana**
Diana, the divine huntress and goddess of the moon, is one of the ancient deities worshipped in Stregheria. Here, she is depicted in a 4th-century BCE bronze figure discovered at Nemi, the sanctuary dedicated to her in central Italy.

The modern movement of Stregheria began in the 1970s with the writings of Italian-American Leo Louis Martello. He described his initiation by relatives into beliefs similar to those in the story of Aradia, but the Sicilian cult of Demeter, goddess of harvest, and her daughter Persephone also influenced his family's witchcraft, and they saw the Virgin Mary as a variant of Demeter. In 1995, American author Raven Grimassi, drawing on Wiccan practices and also claiming initiation into a secret tradition of Italian magic, published *Ways of the Strega*. Both authors helped strengthen and spread Stregheria, especially in Australia, with its substantial Italian-Australian population.

IN CONTEXT

The bearer of light

US folklorist Charles Leland wrote *Aradia or the Gospel of the Witches*, the book that sparked the Stregheria movement. It was based on Leland's exchange with a Florentine fortune-teller called Maddalena, who told him of an ancient Italian witchcraft tradition. Still in existence, its witches worshipped the goddess Diana, her brother (and lover) Lucifer—the "bearer of light"—and their daughter, Aradia, who came to earth to teach magic. The book describes the tradition's rituals, spells, and beliefs, and became popular in the 1960s, although its authenticity is subject to debate.



According to the author of *Aradia*, the book is a sacred text of Stregheria.

"This Stregheria, or old religion, is something more than a sorcery, and something less than a faith."

CHARLES LELAND, *ARADIA OR THE GOSPEL OF THE WITCHES*, 1899

DRAWN FROM THE PAST

Neopaganism

The term Neopaganism refers to modern-day beliefs in a pre-Judaic, pre-Christian, pre-Islamic past. Wicca (see pp.264–267) comes under the Neopagan umbrella. Neopaganism began as 1960s Western counterculture developed, a time when many people rejected established authority in search of a new, free spirituality and meaning in an otherwise material world. It surged in popularity during the 1990s and continues to do so in the 21st century. Neopaganism rarely has creeds or dogmas, but certain features are common to all of its various forms. Followers are usually polytheistic (believe in many deities) or pantheistic (see god in everything); they honor both male and female; they venerate nature, including humans and their ancestral spirits, and regard it as divine in itself. Above all, Neopagans promote magic as a vital force in the world.

Druids, Wicca, nature, and bygone ages

Unlike believers in a New Age (see pp.284–287), who look to the future, Neopagans take their inspiration from the ancient world. Druidism (the practices of Celtic teachers, priests, or wise men)



▼ **Summer solstice**
The solstices—extreme points of the seasonal cycles—are of supreme importance to druids. Here, druids commemorate the summer solstice—the date with the longest hours of daylight—at the ancient site of Stonehenge in southwest England.

had a revival in the 18th century in England, and the Ancient Order of Druids was founded in 1781. The arrival of modern archaeology unearthed new evidence of Celtic faith systems, and modern druidry, also called Neodruidry, developed in the 1960s.

Neopagans have also taken spiritual elements and rituals from earlier occult societies, especially the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn established in London in 1887 (see pp.242–243). The Romantic movement of early 19th-century Europe was another source of inspiration. Romantic painters and poets looked afresh at nature, awed by its beauty. Nature-based religions developed in the 1970s, linked to growing concerns about the environment, and many Neopagans now identify with ecological causes. Many more also champion feminism.





◀ Channeling energy
Dowsing is a form of divination that some Neopagans use to channel inner energies and locate sources of divine power. It is demonstrated here at Ardgroom Stone Circle in County Cork, Ireland, using a crystal pendulum.

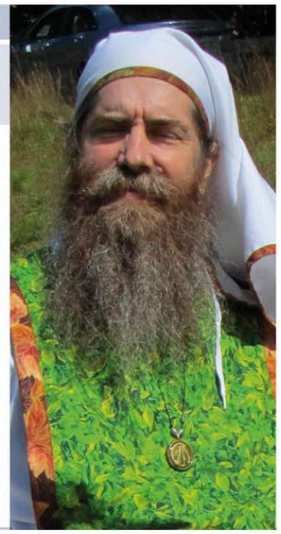
Like druidry, Wicca is a significant branch of Neopaganism, but many groups are smaller. Subgroups include reconstructionists, who re-create and adapt pre-Christian religions, and followers of the gods of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Celticists reimagine the spiritual practices of ordinary Celtic people rather than those of the druids, and heathenists are inspired by ancient Norse and Germanic mythology. Some of these Neopagans have links with alt-right, Neo-Nazi, and white supremacist movements, glorifying an imagined pure Celtic or Viking past into a racist, often anti-feminist, ideology.

Apart from these far right-wing Neopagans, who see multiculturalism as a menace, all the other subsets of Neopaganism value tolerance, diversity, inclusivity, spiritualism, joy, and a delight in magic, and share the notion that others should never be harmed. Individual Neopagans, or small groups called circles, covens, or groves, are now found on every continent.

JOHN MICHAEL GREER (BORN 1962)

Leading light

A prolific and learned author who has written on a wide range of subjects from spirituality to ecology, US-born Greer is now a dominant figure in druidry across the globe. He has been highly influential in spreading druidic lore, teaching, and magic. Much of his work is derived from the 19th-century Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and in 2013 he created a direct offshoot: the Druidical Order of the Golden Dawn. Between 2003 and 2015 Greer took the role of Grand Archdruid of the Ancient Order of Druids in America.





▲ **Symbol of wealth**
This Romanian altar applies the principle of commonality: as the dollar sign is green, green trappings around the altar are thought to increase the success of magic spells to attain greater wealth.

> "Neopaganism is … the worship of the powers of this world. Beautiful, terrible, but all in a circle under the turning sky."
>
> **C.A. BURLAND**, *ECHOES OF MAGIC*, 1972

Making magic work

Neopagans regard magic as a real phenomenon that they can harness. For some, the aim of using magic is to change their consciousness and, ultimately, to contact gods, spirits, or whatever they regard as sacred. Others use magic to attempt to align natural forces in the world with their will in order to bring about change—a practice called thaumaturgy. Whatever the goal, one rule is sacrosanct: magic must never be used to harm people, animals, plants, or the planet. Moreover, according to the threefold law (also called Rule of Three), however much magical force—positive or negative—a practitioner generates, three times as much of that same magic will return to them, so this power needs to be handled ethically. Magicians practicing thaumaturgy believe they are most likely to achieve the change they seek if it follows natural laws: for example, a ritual appeal to a fertility god in the springtime to help make the garden bloom has a good chance of success. Magic can be performed with a specific goal in mind, such as moving to a particular house or flat, but is said to be more likely to work when the goal is broader: for instance, to find a home that fulfills certain criteria.

Typical rituals

Most Neopagans celebrate the eight Sabbats (the Wiccan festivals): the winter and summer solstices, the fall and spring equinoxes, the cross-quarter days (which, according to ancient Celts, marked the start of a season) in between, and other auspicious dates, such as the monthly full moon. Rituals may be solitary, conducted at home or in a

▼ **The magic of fire**
The dominant pagan faith in Lithuania is Romuva. It places strong emphasis on fire as a symbol of the divine. Here, the summer solstice is celebrated in Vilnius, the capital city.

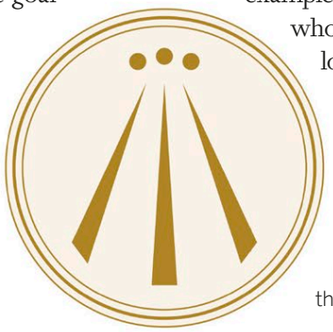




garden, or in a group, in a public place. All take part, regardless of how many people are present. Group rituals often take place in a circle—a sacred ring to enclose and focus the participants—sometimes with a firepit at the center. Alternatively, attention can be directed toward an altar.

The setting is heightened from the everyday norm to stimulate spiritual emotion. Dressing up in appropriate costume, lights, and decorations all help charge the atmosphere. Participants frequently address the compass directions and elements, and invoke spirits—such as Diana, Roman goddess of the moon, when the moon is full. The goal of the ritual, if there is one, is spoken out loud. Depending on beliefs, a drama from the pagan or mythical world may be enacted.

Participants often raise their arms, holding talismans aloft, and chant, sing, and dance around the circle to harness the collective power and energy they believe in. Holding hands is thought to transfer energy, and the laying on of hands is considered by some to have healing powers. Symbols are important and, on a principle allied to homeopathy (that like cures like), similar objects may be used as substitutes for the real thing. For instance, an image or trinket of a dog can stand for a real dog in a ceremony involving Hecate—the main Greek goddess of magic and a key figure in Neopaganism—as she was sometimes shown in canine form, and dogs were sacrificed to her in ancient times. The principle of substitution is equally applied to colors and numbers—for example, three could be substituted for Hecate, who was a triple-faced deity and could look in three directions at once.



◀ Neodruid symbol
Known as Awen, this is one of the most widely used symbols in Neodruidism. However, there is no consensus on its precise meaning: some believe it represents the sun's rays; others a triple deity.

▲ Beltane
These celebrants are dressed as the Wiccan Horned God for the festival of Beltane, usually held on May 1. One of the Sabbats, Beltane is the cross-quarter day between the spring equinox and the summer solstice. Festivities—which often include bonfires, maypole dances, and fertility magic—celebrate the emerging growth in nature.



▲ **Siouxsie Sioux** was the lead singer of a British rock band whose music and witchcraft imagery brought a Gothic punk dimension to pop culture.



Magic and music

Music and magic are naturally complementary art forms, each inspiring the other. Historically, traditional folk music has been used in ritual and ceremonial magic, instilling the appropriate mind-set or mood in participants and creating an atmosphere for dancing and chanting.

The link remains strong to this day, as is reflected in the many allusions to magic in contemporary popular music. This association began playfully in the mid-20th century, with songs such as Frank Sinatra's *That Old Black Magic* (1942), which used magic as a metaphor for love. With the 1960s came a drug-induced world of mysticism and ecstasy that was evident in pop songs such as Jimi Hendrix's *Voodoo Chile* (1968). New Age spirituality emerged at the same time, creating its own genre of music with compilations to aid meditation, yoga, and relaxation.

The trend continued in the 1970s and '80s as many artists referred to magical influences in their music. David Bowie's *Quicksand* (1971) and Ozzy Osbourne's *Mr. Crowley* (1980) both allude to occultist Aleister Crowley (see pp.250–251). The band Siouxsie and the Banshees (left) used imagery of witchcraft, Voodoo, and the occult, inspiring women to join the 1980s Gothic rock movement. Occult influences persist into the 21st century: in 2016, US rapper Azealia Banks pronounced herself a practicing witch, and in 2017, Canadian artist ANIIML branded her music "witch-pop."

"Music is probably the only real magic …"

TOM PETTY, *THE TELEGRAPH*, 2012

HEALING POWERS

the many faces of spirituality and shamanism

The term "shamanism" refers to the spiritual practices of people in the steppe lands of Central Asia and Siberia. In these places, shamanism—the world's oldest continuously practiced form of spiritualism, divination, and magic—dates back some 40,000 years.

Shamanism is sometimes also used as an umbrella term to cover a vast set of spiritual and magical traditions found in tribal or non-European cultures all over the world. Some academics claim that such traditions are related, and define them collectively as shamanism. Many others suggest that, despite appearing similar from an outsider's perspective, these diverse traditions should not be grouped together: spiritual practices vary a great deal between different communities, and many practitioners do not call themselves shamans.



Bridge to the spirit world

The beliefs and practices defined by some academics as shamanistic may share basic features, such as the idea that everything in the natural world is sacred and infused with its own spiritual life, or that all natural objects exist as part of a wider divine whole. This idea of unity can also extend to time; in some cultures, the past, present, and future are thought to exist simultaneously. Accordingly, guardian or ancestral spirits may be venerated for their insight into the future, as well as wisdom from the past.

A shaman, elder, or spiritual adviser provides the link between the material and spiritual worlds: praying to spirits, channeling spirit voices, or crossing into the spirit world. Contact with the spirits might bestow prophetic powers, or the ability to protect against destructive natural forces and enemies, to ensure harvests, or to conduct the souls of the dead to the spirit world. In many places, malign spiritual interventions are believed to cause illnesses. A shaman, healer, or medicine person may invoke good spirits to counteract the evil ones, or make use of plants with curative properties.

Today, people in various cultures consult their spiritual leader or shaman before making any major decision. In some groups, these leaders are born into the role, inheriting it

◀ Ceremonial rattle
During rituals, the rhythm produced by rattles and drums can help people enter a trance. This late 18th-century ceremonial rattle, with exaggerated features and a beaklike nose, is from the northwest coast of America.



"The Great Spirit is in all things, he is in the air we breathe. The Great Spirit is our Father, but the Earth is our Mother."

BIG THUNDER (BEDAGI) WABANAKI ALGONQUIN



from a relative. More commonly, they are considered to have been chosen by the spirits themselves, the marker of which may be an unusual physical trait or a period of mental suffering. The chosen person then spends a lifetime studying their calling.

Trance-inducing ritual

In order to communicate with the spirit world, a shaman or other specialist often goes into a trance deliberately induced by ritual. The exact nature of the rites varies: in Mongolia, for instance, the shaman may wear a crown of feathers or antlers, and sometimes fur, becoming variously a bird, a reindeer, or a bear to reinforce his or her spiritual transformation. In Mongolia and some other cultures, ceremonial observances are group activities. Members of the group may join in with chanting, song, drumming, or music. Fire, too, may be used to enhance the atmosphere and bring participants together. In parts of North and South America, psychoactive plants are ingested to help enter a trance or see visions.

▲ **Modern-day shaman**
In ritual dress, this Mongolian shaman plays a mouth harp and beats a drum in a fire ritual to mark the summer solstice. There are about 10,000 shamans in Mongolia. Male shamans are known as *böö*; female shamans are called *udgan*.



IN CONTEXT

Urban spirituality

Muism (Korean folk religion) was the dominant religious practice in the Korean peninsula until the arrival of Buddhism in the 4th century CE. During the 21st century, Muism has made a comeback—part mystical, part commercial—especially in the South Korean capital, Seoul. In this dynamic, industrial city, and across the nation, the rituals of Muist spiritual specialists are both semi-clandestine and widely acknowledged. Practitioners of Muism—*manshin*—are almost all women. For a fee, they advise on modern-day transactions such as which car or house to buy, or what job to apply for. To ask for the intervention of gods and ancestors, *manshin* perform *gut* rites that help them cross into the spirit world and find answers. Dressed in flamboyant clothes, they dance, sing, pray, and make offerings and sacrifices to the spirits on an altar purified by fire and water.

A *manshin* performs a purifying ritual with white paper.

While practices labeled shamanistic take different forms in different regions, the basic belief that a higher spiritual wisdom determines human fates is common to all. For example, the San people of southern Africa—until the 1950s among the last hunter-gatherers in the world—believe in an overarching spirit world. At the other end of the globe, shamans such as the *mide* of the Ojibwe in Canada and *angakoks* of the Inuit in the Arctic are revered as spiritual advisers of great knowledge, in touch with the powers that guide people's fates.

On an individual level, many people who are ill still consult shamans, healers, or medicine people because they trust in their power to cure them. In much of Latin America, for instance, traditional healers are known as *curanderos* (see p.283) and their healing practices may make use of trance, prayer, spiritual cleansing, herbs and oils, or hallucinogens such as *peyote*. Fetish healers are common in West Africa, where the fetish (talisman) market in Togo's capital Lomé is famous across the region, and people come to be treated for ailments ranging from asthma to erectile dysfunction, typhoid to tuberculosis. Meanwhile, the people known in different Native American tribes variously as doctors, herbalists, curers, diagnosticians, or medicine people, are renowned for their healing powers as well as for being spiritual leaders.



▶ **Fetish medicine**
This traditional healer in Lomé, Togo, recites incantations to help cure a patient who bows down in front of an array of fetishes, including skulls, statuettes, and feathers.

In its original Siberian homelands, shamanism has reemerged. Suppressed under Soviet rule, it has resurfaced hesitantly since the early 1990s. Likewise, shamanism in Mongolia, which was banned



▲ **Hand drum**
This deerskin drum is decorated with an image of the Great Spirit honored by the Assiniboine people of North America's Great Plains. Ritual drumming led by medicine men is part of their ceremonies, the most important of which is the sun dance held in spring.

for 70 years under Communist rule, has seen a resurgence since 1992, when the ancient practice was given protected status by the country's constitution. Known as Tengrism, it is regarded as Mongolia's national religion and part of its identity.

Voice of the earth

Alongside the growth of Neopaganism and New Age practices, Neoshamanism has gained ground in the West since the 1990s. Driven by their conviction that humans face an ecological crisis of their own making, New Agers find in Neoshamanism—with its links to the natural world—one response to their belief that only a return to an original innocence can prevent people despoiling the earth. Neoshamanists also search for self-knowledge, and many adopt an eclectic path, whether working with totem or spirit animals, undertaking dream journeys and quests for visions, engaging in astral projection, meditating, or going into trances. This approach is resented by some who adhere to traditional teachings, particularly in cases where some Neoshamans demand payment in exchange for their services.



▲ ***Llullon Llaki Supai*** is a 2006 painting by Peruvian artist Pablo Amaringo (1938– 2009) inspired by the threatened wonders of the rainforest.



Visions in the jungle

Peruvian artist Pablo Amaringo trained as a *curandero* (medicine man) in the Amazon basin. *Curanderos* use local plant remedies to treat physical, mental, and psychological ailments, sometimes aided by Catholic prayers and rituals originally brought to Latin America by Spanish colonists. Amaringo was an *ayahuasquero*—a specialist *curandero* who works with a psychoactive plant brew called *ayahuasca*, used as a traditional spiritual medicine. In 1977, he retired to become a painter, and he later founded a school of art dedicated to recording and preserving the indigenous way of life and the rainforest flora and fauna.

Amaringo's intricate paintings depict the visions he saw under the influence of *ayahuasca*. As he painted, he sang *ícaros*—magical chants that induce a trance during an *ayahuasca* ceremony. He believed that he sent the magic of the *ícaros* into his paintings, ready to transmit their power and knowledge to the receptive beholder. The picture on the left represents the wonder of the plant kingdom, creating the food and oxygen that humans need to survive. The anacondas in the water warn of the dangers of destroying rivers, lakes, and forests. At the top of the painting the huge eyes of the Mother of the Forest look down, while on the left *bufeos* (river dolphins) are lined up like plants to indicate how closely all life forms interlink.

"A *curandero* has in his mind and heart the attitude of conserving nature ..."

PABLO AMARINGO, *SACRED HOOP* MAGAZINE, 2006

MIND, BODY, SPIRIT

New Age practices

The New Age movement emerged from the counterculture of the 1960s, which rejected established beliefs and religions. New Age followers enthusiastically adopted a range of alternative practices, many non-Western in origin, in a search for enlightenment and spiritual fulfillment. New Agers of the 1960s presumed that a new age of harmony was imminent, hence the movement's name. In the 21st century, it is practiced almost exclusively in the West and is growing in popularity. By 2015, there were estimated to be as many as 60 million followers. Magic plays as great a part as any individual deems necessary.



▼ **Crackling with energy** Arizona's Cathedral Rock is the capital of New Age America. It is seen as an absolute focus of spiritual energy and the frequencies of the universe.

Core creeds

New Age has as many beliefs as it has believers, but there are some core contentions. The strongest is a rejection of the materialism of the West. As a replacement, followers take aspects of non-Christian religions including the focus on personal growth of Hinduism and the contemplative serenity of Buddhism. New Agers are pantheistic—seeing the presence of god everywhere—and accept that all religions have their own truths, to be pursued wherever they lead. The movement also overlaps with environmental and feminist activism. Followers think that in the New Age the current patriarchal world will be overthrown to create a fresh Eden and an end to industrialization and capitalism. The future will be simpler—a return to a more innocent world.

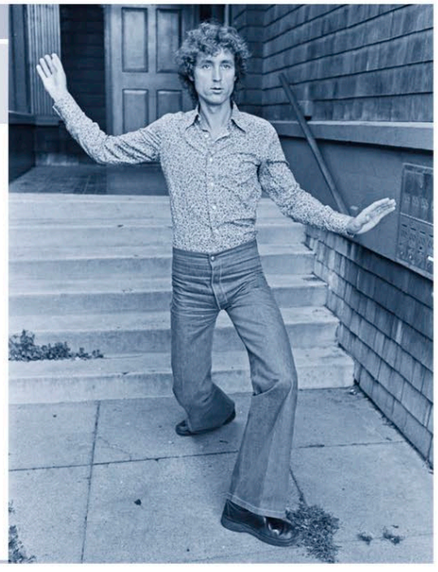
The higher self

New Agers believe that everyone can, and should strive to, attain their higher, better self by virtue of three propositions. Firstly, they think there is a divine relationship that encompasses humanity: all people are one—a creed derived largely from theosophy (see pp.238–239)—and in the future there will be only one society and one religion, bringing together humanity in a single entity. The second premise is that humanity is united with nature, and all must live in harmony. Thirdly, New Agers believe that everyone should seek to realize their own divine goodness, and can determine their own relative values—that is to say, there should be no externally imposed morality: each person must decide for themselves what is important, right, and true.

FRITJOF CAPRA (BORN 1939)

Mysticism meets physics

New Age belief contends that there is not just an essential spiritual unity that binds the world but that, by extension, this wholeness must be reflected in science. The Austrian-American physicist Fritjof Capra has been one of the strongest advocates of this view. His 1975 book, *The Tao of Physics*, argued that in the end metaphysics (the nature of existence) and physics will converge—they must be the same if both are true. Capra's book has been discredited in many academic circles by scholars who claim his text is out of date and unscientific, but it continues to attract avid support from New Age readers. Capra later became a champion of environmental issues, working to build and nurture sustainable communities that imitate the ecosystems of nature.





◀ Age of Aquarius
Most New Age followers of the 1960s read in the stars that a better future, often called the Age of Aquarius, was coming. Here, the water-bearer Aquarius pours forth the waters of wisdom, nurturing the growth of a more spiritual and harmonious era.



▶ Yoga in practice
The *asanas* (positions) demonstrated here are intended in yoga both as an aid to fitness and flexibility and as a means to achieve spiritual clarity and enlightenment. Yoga originated in ancient India.

"Om Shanti shanti shanti
[Om Peace peace peace]"

YOGIC MANTRA



▶ **Yin and Yang symbol**
Adopted by many New Agers, the Yin and Yang in Chinese lore sum up existence. They are in permanent, perfect balance: Yin (the black side) passive; Yang (the white side) active.

Bringing about unity

New Agers are holistic, believing that mind, body, and spirit are one: and so to heal the body it is necessary to heal the mind first. Some even prefer to call their movement Spirituality, or Mind, Body, and Spirit. Yoga and meditation are a means to self-knowledge and the most widely practiced routes to spiritual release. There are numerous forms, including Iyengar, Ashtanga, and Sivananda yoga, and Zen, Transcendental, and Buddhist Vipassana meditation. Both yoga and meditation nurture self-esteem and positive thinking, qualities highly valued among New Age followers. The Law of Attraction—positive thoughts, often spoken out loud as affirmations, reversing and replacing ingrained negative self-beliefs—is helpful to many.

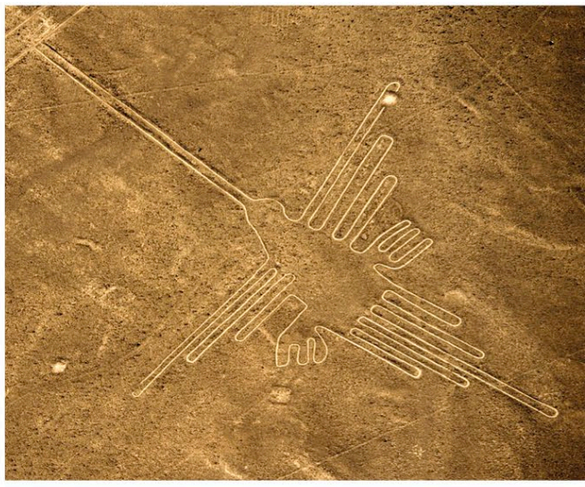
Insight for the future

Many New Age practitioners maintain that channelers—certain favored New Agers able to communicate with angels and masters—can act as mediums to contact the dead, and pass on their knowledge and wisdom to the living. Some channelers claim to contact residents of ancient civilizations such as Egypt, South America, or the legendary Atlantis or Mu, and convey their spiritual messages.

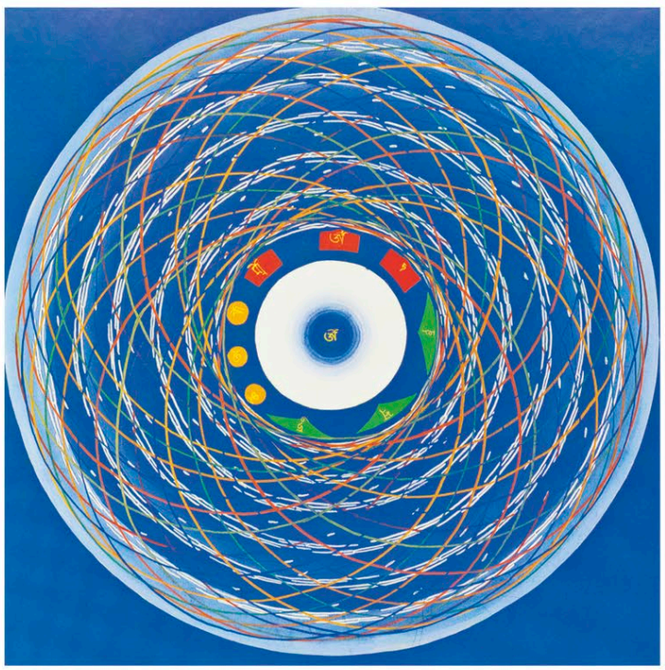
Like channeling, astral projection (during which the astral body observes the self and the world from the astral plane) is also thought to put its practitioners in contact with a higher spiritual world. The state of mind that makes such an out-of-body experience possible is said to be achieved at will, usually through deep and solitary relaxation.

Many New Agers believe in reincarnation, through which the past educates and directs the present. Some followers even assert that alien life forces will prove to be humankind's salvation. Less controversially, many New Age followers simply use visualization to imagine divine creatures, or even just animals, as a path to enlightenment. Others may use psychic readings through *I Ching*, astrology, crystal balls, or tarot cards (see pp.52–53, 158–161, and 214–219) to predict the future.

None of these practices and beliefs come without critics, many of whom were once New Agers themselves. Some worry that practitioners are less interested in a spiritual vision than in making money from passing fads, at worst endangering the lives of people who buy their wares to treat serious illnesses that need conventional medical treatment. Others complain of vague goals and lack of any coherent belief. For most, however, the myriad beliefs and promise of a purged and purified future are what give the New Age movement its strength.



▲ **Nazca lines**
New Agers value links to past cultures, such as these giant lines etched onto the sands of Peru, and some followers even try to contact the ancient Nazca people who made them.



▶ **Mandala**
Common to Hinduism and Buddhism, a *mandala* illustrates deities. Like many *mandalas* today, this Nepalese example is abstract, conveying the wholeness, unity, and renewal of the cosmos.



◀ Baphomet statue
The 11th-century deity Baphomet, adopted by Satanists as an official symbol, appears in the form of a Sabbatic goat. In 2015, the Satanic Temple built a huge statue of Baphomet as a challenge to orthodox Christians.

WORSHIP OF THE SELF

Satanism



▲ **The face of Satanism**
Anton LaVey reveled in his capacity to outrage, adopting an overtly Satanic image and conducting nude rituals. In 1969, he wrote *The Satanic Bible*, the core text of LaVeyan Satanism.

The very word *Satanism* summons images of devil worship and blood sacrifices, but the reality is very different. While modern Satanism, with its atheistic promotion of personal freedom, typically encourages individuals to indulge in what many view as sins (such as greed and lust) and to put themselves first, respect for the rights of others is also a core value.

The Church of Satan

Modern Satanism began in San Francisco on April 30 ,1966, which was declared *Anno Satanas*—the first year in the age of Satan. It was created by American occultist Anton LaVey, and promotes the beliefs that there are no gods or higher beings; that humans have great capacity for self-improvement, but are carnal beings; that there is no afterlife; and that humans are, in effect, gods themselves, able to determine their own destinies by exercising self-will. LaVey named the movement after Satan to shock people, and adopted the sinister goat-headed deity, Baphomet, as its symbol. Yet Satanists, as atheists, do not believe in the Devil—Satan being a Christian concept, if there is no God, there is no Satan. LaVey's ethos embraces sensual fulfillment, yet his core creeds stress self-discovery and growth as the prime means of personal improvement.



◀ **Satanic altar**
An altar is a key component of Satanic rituals, according to LaVey's *Satanic Bible*. A variety of objects may be used, and the symbol of Baphomet is usually present.

Rites and rituals

Satanic magic typically consists of psychological processes rather than a belief in supernatural forces. There are two primary forms: "greater" magic involves ritual practices that create the mental space to process emotional or physical events, while "lesser" magic involves the manipulation of a situation in order to achieve a desired outcome by using one's physical attributes or psychological guile.

Satanic rituals are important, but there are no rules: any form of observance may be used, the goal being to allow the will to impose itself. Some Satanists use symbolic objects such as bells, chalices, swords, and elixirs, and may even use a (consenting) nude female as an altar. Crucial to Satanism is the idea that the "self" is the key source of power in any magic or ritual.



▲ **The Sigil of Baphomet**
The official symbol of the Church of Satan shows the head of Baphomet within an inverted pentagram, enclosed in a circle. It is surrounded by Hebrew characters which, read counterclockwise from the bottom, spell "Leviathan."

Variants and rivals

In 1975, the first group to split away from LaVey's Satanism emerged as the Temple of Set, declaring belief in Set, the ancient Egyptian god of fire and chaos. Many other Satanic subsects exist, including the Satanic Temple, which broke away in 2013. Calling itself an evolved and updated form of Satanism, it promotes a highly political (left-leaning) agenda.



▼ ***Lakakare* charms** from Papua New Guinea are coconuts carved into pigs or marine creatures and filled with magical substances to ward off evil spirits. This one has a swordfish jaw attached.



◀ **Worry dolls** are worn in Guatemala and Mexico. The dolls are believed to share the owner's worries with the Mayan Princess Ixmucane, daughter of the sun god, who, legend has it, gave her the gift of taking away people's problems.



▲ **The Star of David** is an ancient Jewish magical symbol comprising two overlaid equilateral triangles. In pendant form, such stars are still used as talismans.



▲ **St. Christopher medallions** are travelers' talismans as the saint is believed to have carried the baby Jesus safely across a river on his shoulders.



▲ ***Maneki neko*** are Japanese charms in the form of lucky beckoning cats that have a paw raised to summon good fortune to the owner.





▲ **Chinese *bi*** are symbols of heaven, often shaped into a disk. *Bi* are believed to bring wealth, a long life, and good luck from divine forces.



▲ **This Native American birth fetish** in the form of a beaded turtle contains a lock of both parents' hair and the baby's umbilical cord. It is designed to bring good luck and health to the child.

Modern talismans

Talismans are believed to give the owner extra power or good fortune and include objects as diverse as King Arthur's legendary sword Excalibur or a sports club's lucky mascot. Originally, talismans were made specially for an individual and were given intrinsic powers through magical ritual, but many are now mass-produced and people believe their power comes from what they symbolize.



▲ **Islamic hands of Fatima** (the daughter of Muhammad) are worn by women as a defense against the evil eye. They have been common throughout the Middle East for centuries and have more recently been adopted by New Age followers.



▲ **Witch balls** are talismans invented in the 19th century but believed to have older roots. Their shiny surfaces were said to trap witches using their own reflections.



▶ **The Celtic cross** is an ancient combination of a circle and cross believed to bring strength, wisdom, protection, and inspiration.



▲ **Buddhist votive tablets** and similar carved wooden talismans are extremely popular in Thailand. To maximize their sacred power, monks have to pray over the talismans, often for days on end.



▲ **Personal military charms** were carried by many soldiers in both World Wars in the hope of avoiding injury or death.



▲ ***Ody*** are talismans filled with potions and worn by the people of Madagascar for protection and good luck.

Dancing with the dead

The West African countries of Togo, Ghana, Nigeria, and Benin are the heartlands of Vodun (or Voodoo, see pp.204–207). Vodun is an official religion in Benin, where it has none of the negative connotations attached to Voodoo in the West. Every January, people from across Benin, Togo, and Nigeria descend on the town of Ouidah for Benin's annual festival of worship, which for believers culminates in communion with the dead through trance.

Vodun has a teeming pantheon, all descended from the Supreme Being and creator of the universe, Nana Buluku. His children, Mawu, goddess of the moon, and Lisa, god of the sun, preside over a range of deities and spirits. The most important are Ayida-Weddo, the Rainbow Serpent, mediator between the spirit and living worlds, and Legba, simultaneously old and wise, young and impetuous. Every clan or tribe has its own priestess, presiding over animal sacrifices to appease these spirits. Fetishes—statues and the heads of animals including monkeys, dogs, and cobras—are said to cure ailments and woes.

In the Vodun belief system, ancestors are reached by spirits, and each newborn child is a reincarnation of an ancestor. Trances are thought to enable communication with the world of spirits and ancestors, who then visit earth to possess and guide the living. This member (right) of the Yoruba, a Nigerian ethnic group, enters a trance, brought on by chanting, drumming, and dancing, to take on the power of ancestral spirits.

"Vodun is a way of life in its country of origin, Benin."

ANISHA SHAH, TRAVEL WRITER, 2017





▲ **A shrouded dancer**, face veiled by cowrie shells, whirls in a frenzied trance at the climax of Benin's week-long Voodoo Festival.

THE TASTE FOR SPECTACLE

magic as modern entertainment

In London in 1921, innovator P.T. Selbit became the first magician to perform what rapidly became a favorite of stage magic: he sawed his female assistant in half. The trick caused a sensation: the world of stage magic went spectacle crazy.

Four decades on, the most flamboyant of all magic acts, the German-born duo of Siegfried and Roy, took Las Vegas by storm. Their trademarks were huge sets, glittering costumes, and wild animals seemingly tamed. Audiences flocked to see them, and magic was big business.



▲ **Show business meets magic**
Siegfried and Roy performed in the American capital of entertainment, Las Vegas, for almost 40 years. Docile white lions and tigers were part of the magical act.

Illusions on screen

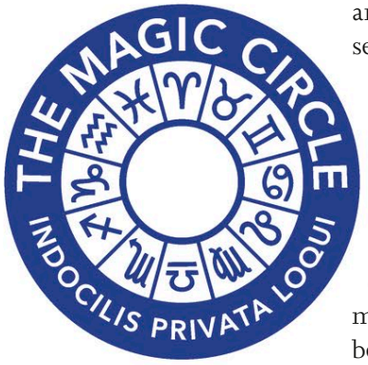
American illusionist David Copperfield continued this trend for the spectacular. In a series of stunts broadcast to millions, he appeared to float over the Grand Canyon, walk through the Great Wall of China, saw himself in half with a laser, and make the Statue of Liberty disappear. Copperfield became the richest magician of all time, with a mastery of technology that allowed him to make the apparently impossible possible.

For Copperfield, and the magicians who came after him, television provided a huge audience. The small screen was brilliantly exploited in the UK by Paul Daniels and by the eccentric Tommy Cooper, who drolly acted as if he were scarcely in control of his magical tricks. Penn and Teller in the US have also blended comedy with demanding stagecraft, and the standards of magic on screen continue to rise.

Endurance and mentalism

Another American, David Blaine, has pioneered a different kind of magic: that of improbable feats of endurance. These have included surviving in a block of ice, being drowned, and spending 44 days on the banks of London's Thames River in a plexiglass case with no food. In 2008, he held his breath for more than 17 minutes. Blaine also epitomized the magic of the mentalist—allegedly demonstrating extraordinary mental powers. In his case, rather than mind-reading, he mixed acute psychological insight with sleight of hand.

In the UK, entertainers such as Derren Brown and Dynamo tapped into audiences' appetite for mentalism. In his television series *The Events*, Brown made inventive use of the medium by including a short film that he claimed could stop viewers from leaving their seats. Dynamo, a magician for the Internet age, took magic online by using YouTube to promote his own brand of mentalism and expert card tricks. He quickly gained a global following.



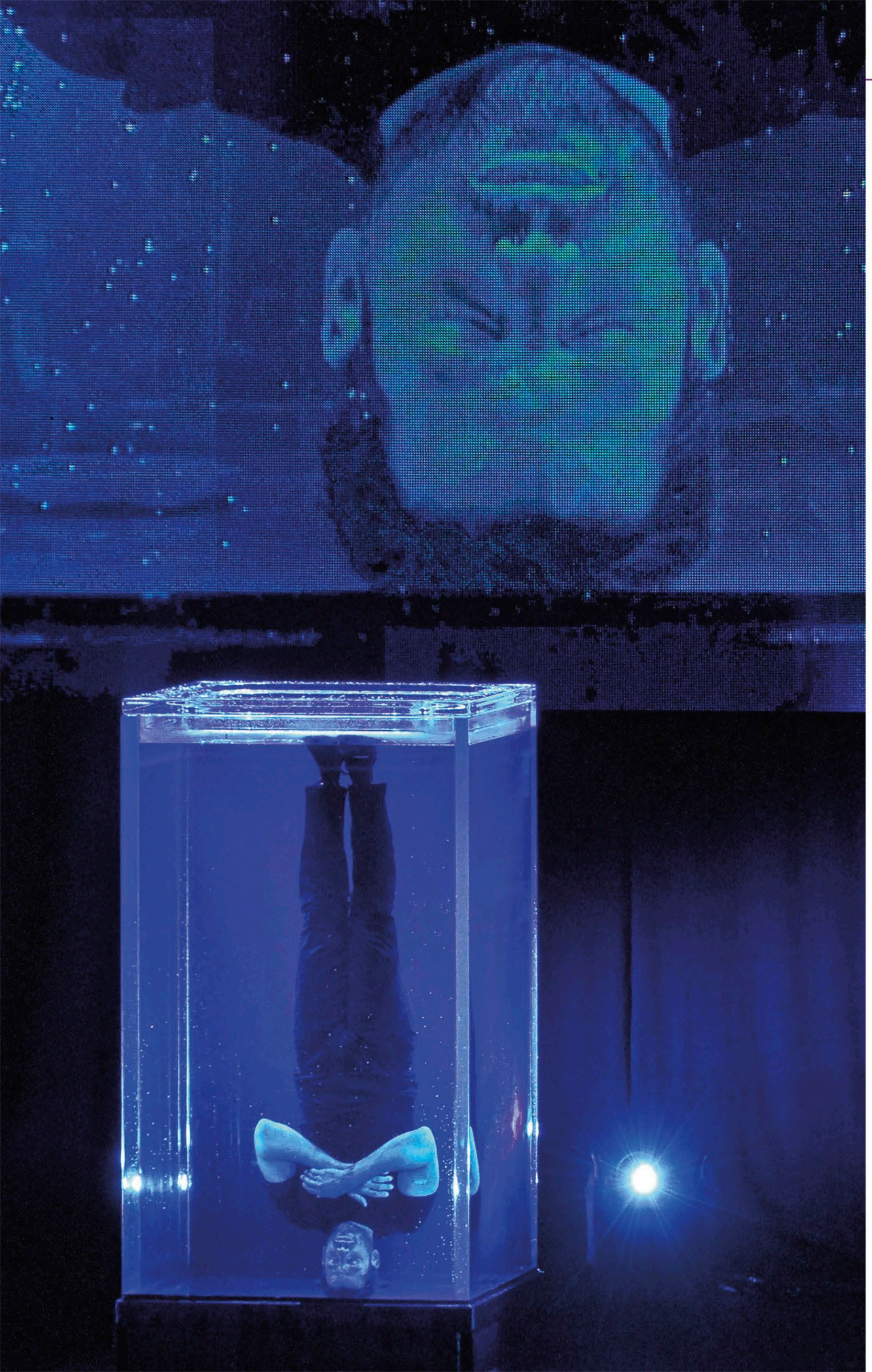
▲ **The Magic Circle logo**
In 1905, The Magic Circle was founded in London. The Latin motto means "not apt to disclose secrets," and any member magician who does so is likely to be expelled.

IN CONTEXT

Escapologists

Ever since Houdini (see p.259), escapology has been a core magic act. In 1959, a Briton, Alan Alan, introduced a twist to Houdini's straitjacket escapes. He broke free while suspended from a burning rope, a feat since performed by American Dorothy Dietrich (right), who is also the first woman to have performed the "bullet catch in the mouth." Another American, Robert Gallup, has gone further—he was dropped from a plane, caged and straitjacketed, with his parachute strapped outside. The risks of such stunts are real: in 1990, American Amazing Joe died after being buried in wet cement.





◀ Underwater endurance
As part of his tour of North America in 2017, David Blaine held his breath for as long as possible—the exact length of time varied between performances—while suspended in a water tank. The use of television screens in the stage shows helped their large audiences feel closer to the action.



▶ **Austin Osman Spare**
The English artist and occultist painted this self-portrait as a magician in 1909. Spare rejected conventional magic and instead explored his own subconscious as a path to self-knowledge.

MAGIC WITH NO RULES

chaos magic

Developed in the UK in the late 1970s, chaos magic is an attempt to strip away the occult ritual, deep learning, and mysticism that surrounds ceremonial magic. There are no rules, dogma, or hierarchy, but there are goals of personal development, fulfillment, and a connection to the universe. The magic is described as "chaotic" in the sense that practitioners consider existence to be purely what an individual perceives it to be—change that perception, and the world changes as a result.

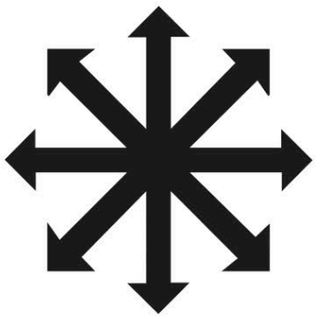
No-mind state

For chaos magic to work, an individual must first learn to free their subconscious—the store of great power, knowledge, and understanding. This idea was proposed by English painter and occultist Austin Osman Spare, whose 1913 work *The Book of Pleasure* became a core text. He claimed that freeing the subconscious could be achieved through a state of *gnosis*—putting the conscious mind in limbo to reach the subconscious mind. Spare suggested and used various techniques to reach this trance-like state, including gentle, passive methods, such as yoga and meditative focus on a single point; and enjoyable activities, such as chanting, dancing, and sexual ecstasy (the most consistently favored), when the active mind is overtaken by pleasure.

Sigils—symbols of magical power

Spare also promoted the use of sigils—reducing the words and letters of a meaningful phrase to a monogram or glyph—believed to have magical power. Other magicians used sigils, too, as an aid to calling on external spirits, but Spare and other chaos magicians transmitted them internally to the subconscious when in a state of *gnosis*.

Vital to chaos magic is the ability to cast aside a belief or practice once a goal has been achieved. So as soon as a sigil had served its purpose, Spare advised deliberately forgetting it, an act of will that demanded exceptional discipline. In his world, a method could only be useful in the moment—if it became a habit, then it ceased to be chaos magic.



▲ **Symbol of chaos**
This symbol was devised in 1961 by English science-fiction writer, Michael Moorcock. In his own words, it "represents all possibilities," as its eight arrows point in all directions.

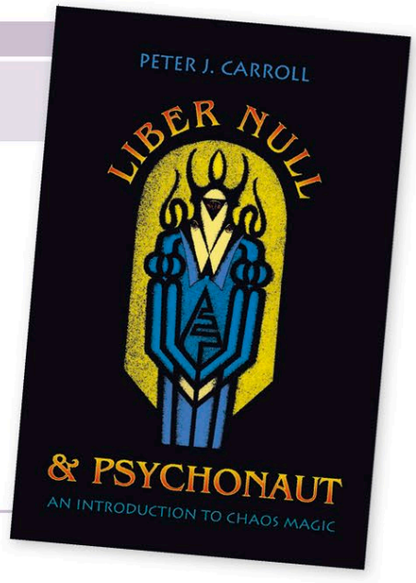
> "The more chaotic I am, the more complete I am."
>
> **AUSTIN OSMAN SPARE**, *THE BOOK OF PLEASURE*, 1913

IN CONTEXT

Spirit of chaos

Along with fellow English occultist Ray Sherwin, Peter Carroll was the driving force of chaos magic in the 1970s, influenced by Austin Osman Spare. Carroll cofounded the Illuminates of Thanateros, an international organization of practical magic and the most influential chaos magic grouping. His many magical and quasi-scientific ideas include a theory that time is three-dimensional and that starships capable of spanning the universe are a possibility.

Peter Carroll's *Liber Null and Psychonaut*, published in a single volume in 1987, are handbooks of the theory and practice of chaos magic.





FROM HAG TO HERO

witches in film and television

Depictions of the witch in popular culture have changed since the early 20th century. From early incarnations of a warty old woman, the image has been modernized to represent female empowerment—sometimes for good or for mischievous entertainment and at other times frightening, unsettling, or plain evil.

Changing face of witches

The film *Häxan* presented the first screen depiction in 1922, with a macabre evocation of medieval witches, while Disney's 1937 *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* depicted a cartoon version. So began a trend for witches as evil persecutors of the innocent that persisted in later films such as *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Little Mermaid*, adapted from fairy tales. Yet the classic green-faced witch who features in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) is countered by a benign witch, Glinda, introducing the idea that powerful witches could be good as well as bad.

The second half of the 20th century heralded a new type of witch—a seemingly ordinary woman with extraordinary powers. In the 1964 US sitcom *Bewitched* a housewife gently undermined her husband with magic; and in 1971, *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* featured a trainee witch who stopped a Nazi invasion with her spells. While the tone was lighthearted, these witches represented powerful women undermining the patriarchy—one of the tenets of modern witchcraft.

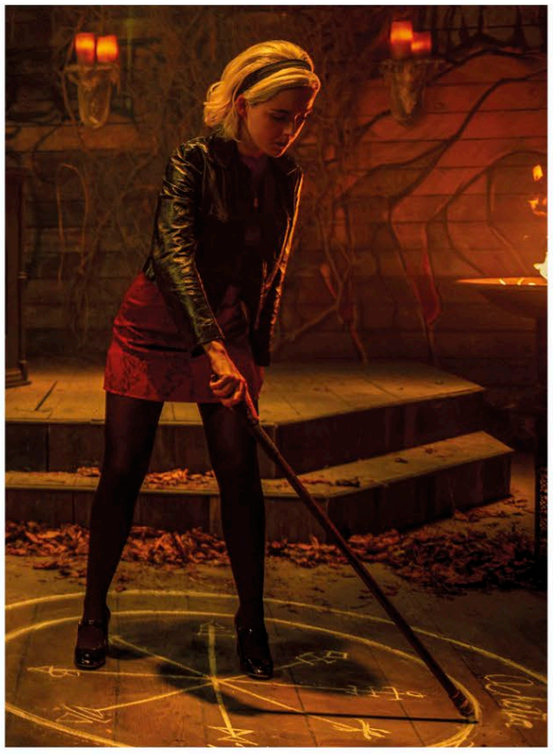
◀ **Wicked Witch**
The 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* included an iconic on-screen interpretation of a witch. The Wicked Witch of the West set a visual template for witches in popular culture that lasted for decades.

The message of female empowerment continued through the '80s and '90s: in *The Witches of Eastwick* three witches cast out a male oppressor; both *Practical Magic* and the TV series *Charmed* also celebrated the sisterhood. In the late '90s came the rise of the teen witch. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* brought the feminist message to a younger audience, even (in a groundbreaking move) depicting an on-screen lesbian relationship.

The darker side

The role of the witch has been revised to take a darker turn in some cases since the late '90s. In the supernatural horror film *The Craft*, four outcast teenage schoolgirls are witches bent on revenge, and in *The Blair Witch Project*, which terrified audiences by purporting to be a shakily shot true story, a malign, unseen witch haunts the woods. More recently, *The Witch* (2015), set in 17th-century New England, presented an equally threatening landscape, one that harbored a powerful and ambiguous witch.

The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina, a series for younger viewers, recasts its '90s predecessor in a macabre light, while *American Horror Story* depicts witches as powerful figures, darkly sexual and ruthless, but not always evil. The witch continues to fulfill many on-screen roles—cautionary tale, symbol of resistance, feminist fantasy, malign force, and, above all, a female hero for modern times.



▲ **The modern macabre**
The dark coming of age story *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* mixes horror, witchcraft, and the occult, and taps into the current vogue for cinematic depictions of witches as powerful feminist figures.

"Who would have thought a good little girl like you could destroy my beautiful wickedness?"

THE WICKED WITCH OF THE WEST, *THE WIZARD OF OZ*, 1939

THE ENERGY OF OTHERS

witchcraft in the Internet age

The rise of the Internet has played a significant role in the expansion of witchcraft during the 21st century. A sharp increase in the number of dedicated websites, blogs, and social media sites has helped the movement to thrive by enabling practitioners to access like-minded souls in virtual covens. As a means of promoting feelings of personal empowerment—one of the core aims of modern witchcraft—the online world has proved a great boon.



◀ Past and future
Social media meets folklore, as a traditionally dressed Romanian witch takes a selfie before beginning a live ritual on Facebook in April 2019.

Transformative energies

Clear differences between "technopagans" and the older, more established practitioners of Wicca (see pp.264–267) have been reinforced by the use of the Internet. The calling of this new generation is not always faith-based—gods and goddesses feature according to the individual's preference. Often the emphasis of modern witchcraft is placed on the release of liberating and healing powers, and on finding a way to connect these transformative energies with the natural world.

Another consequence of an Internet-linked society is that it has led to the embrace of political activism as a legitimate goal of witchcraft. Magic and activism have become linked through an online network of communities, which stress the importance of witchcraft as a means of creating a more just and equitable world.

As the scope of witchcraft in the 21st century has expanded with the Internet, so has its commercial prospects. Online selling of items such as crystals, potions (and recipes), tarot cards, and Ouija boards taps into witchcraft as a fashion and lifestyle statement. In Romania, the *vrajitoare* (witches) offer online consultations for a fee: services include fortune-telling and boosting romantic hopes.



IN PRACTICE

Emoji spells

Not all 21st-century witchcraft takes itself seriously, as is suggested by the growth of emoji spells. The practitioner uses their mobile phone like a magic wand to conjure and send nonverbal spells to themself or others. Emoji spell-makers draw on folk traditions, for example, first creating a magic circle for protection (afterward cast aside) and breathing deeply to induce a sense of serenity. Thereafter almost anything can be wished for, from a better cup of coffee to less time spent waiting at airport security.



Crystal balls flank DIY and dollar signs in a wealth spell.

> "I see pagans, especially witches, as evolving into what I will call the People of the Web."
>
> **M. MACHA NIGHTMARE**, PRIESTESS AND WITCH, 2009



Social warriors

Politically, many modern witches are advocates of feminism and defiant in the face of a male-dominated society. While feminism is not a prerequisite for the practice of witchcraft, the two movements share values. In the words of self-identified non-binary transgender witch Dakota Hendrix, "We are defying the patriarchy [and] the submissive norm." Modern witchcraft promotes solidarity, actively creating a powerful support network for the more excluded factions of society, such as individuals from the LGBTQ+ community and people of color. It now extends well beyond the Western world, with prominence in African countries as well as in Latin America, where modern witchcraft fits well with the strong tradition of *brujería* (folk magic and occult religious practices). Additionally, a "magical resistance" has been launched to combat those political forces deemed reactionary and repressive. In 2017, for example, American singer Lana Del Rey attempted "a spell to bind Donald Trump and all who abet him."

▲ The activist witch
A group of modern witches, photographed here at the Free Speech Rally in Boston in August 2017, add their voices to those of thousands of protestors objecting to the alleged right-wing goals of the rally's organizers.



GLOSSARY AND INDEX



GLOSSARY

Afterlife A life that some people believe begins when you die, for example, a life in heaven or as another person or animal.

Alchemy The medieval forerunner of chemistry focusing on the transmutation of matter, in particular with attempts to convert base metals into gold or to find a potion granting immortality.

Almanac An annual calendar containing important dates and statistical and astronomical information. In the 16th and 17th centuries, almanacs listed dates for church festivals, feast days, and market days, followed by more specific astronomical sections, including times of sunrises and sunsets, and then astrological predictions about the weather, crops, and politics.

Amulet An object, which may be found rather than crafted, such as a beaver's tooth, thought to have magical powers and worn on the body. *See also* Talisman.

Animism The belief that anything natural, such as plants, animals, rocks, water, or thunder, has a spirit and can influence human events.

Apotropaic Magic that can avert evil influences or bad luck.

Astral magic A type of magic that involves the stars and planets, and their spirits.

Astral projection A person's attempt to detach their soul or consciousness, known as the astral body, from their physical form to allow it to travel through the astral realm (between the divine and human planes).

Astrology The practice of studying and interpreting the movements of the stars and planets in the belief that they can influence human lives and events on earth.

Augury Reading omens believed to be present in natural phenomena, such as weather patterns, the flight of birds, or the entrails of sacrificial animals.

Book of Shadows The book used by a practitioner of Wicca to record spells and rituals. Each book is personal to its owner. *See also* Grimoire.

Celestial bodies Objects that move through the sky, such as planets, stars, and the sun and moon. Historically, these were sometimes associated with particular angels or spirits.

Ceremonial magic High or learned magic characterized by the use of ritual, ceremony, and specialized tools or clothing.

Cleromancy Ancient Chinese divinatory practice of casting yarrow stalks to form a solid or broken line, then repeating this action to form six rows and interpreting the resulting hexagram in relation to a particular question. Cleromancy is the basis of the divinatory text *I Ching*.

Conjuring Invoking spirits or practicing illusionist magic.

Crystallomancy The practice of looking into a crystal with the aim of seeing visions within it, often for divination; also known as crystal gazing.

Cunning folk Also known as healers, practitioners of medicine, magic, and divination within the context of local traditions in Christian Europe. Services included midwifery, magical protection, healing, and matchmaking.

Curse A solemn utterance that is intended to invoke a supernatural power to inflict harm or punishment on someone or something.

Curse tablet A small tablet with a curse written on it, usually from the Greco-Roman world. Curse tablets were used to ask the gods, spirits, or a deceased person to perform an action on a person or object, or otherwise compel the subject of the curse.

Deity A god or goddess (in a polytheistic religion such as Hinduism); the creator and supreme being (in a monotheistic religion such as Christianity); also denotes divine status, quality, or nature.

Demon Wicked spirit able to access occult powers; demonology is the study of demons. In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the Devil is the most powerful demon.

Demonic magic A definition, originating in the medieval period, for magic whose effects were thought to be achieved through the powers of demons, and therefore to be intrinsically sinful.

Divination The skill or practice of discovering or saying what will happen in the future.

Doctrine of signatures The belief that natural objects that looked like a part of the body could cure diseases that would arise there. Christian and Muslim folk healers in the medieval era claimed that God, or Allah, deliberately made plants resemble the parts of the body they were able to cure. For example, eyebright, a plant whose flower looks like bright blue eyes, was used in the treatment of eye diseases. *See also* Sympathetic magic.

Ectoplasm A substance that is believed to surround ghosts and other creatures connected with spiritual activities.

Effigy A representation of a specific person in the form of sculpture or some other three-dimensional medium.

Enochian magic A type of ceremonial magic, developed by John Dee and Edward Kelley, that aims to invoke and control various spirits.

Equinox Either of the two occasions in the year (spring or fall) when the center of the sun is directly above the equator, and day and night are of equal length; celebrated by Neopagans as two of the Sabbats.

Esoteric(ism) Western tradition of mystical, specialized knowledge held only by the privileged few and associated with the occult. Hermeticism, gnosticism, Rosicrucianism, and the Kabbalah are examples of esotericism.

Evil eye A curse believed to be cast by a malevolent gaze, usually fixed on a person when they are unaware.

Exorcism The process of forcing an evil spirit to leave a person or place by using prayers or magic.

Extispicy A type of divination carried out in ancient Mesopotamia and Greece by examining the entrails of a sheep.

Familiar A spirit, usually in the shape of a cat, bird, or other small domestic animal, that is the close companion of a witch and gives her magical powers.

Fetish An object that is worshipped in some societies because it is believed to have a spirit or special magical powers.

Folk healing The traditional art of medicine as practiced among (usually) rural communities, consisting typically of the use of herbal remedies, fruits, and vegetables thought to have healing power. Folk healers do not have professional qualifications like doctors or priests. *See also* Cunning folk.

Folk magic The magical practices of the common folk, rather than the ceremonial magic that was performed by the learned elite. Folk magic is generally practical and meant to address the common concerns of the community, such as healing the sick, bringing love or luck, driving away evil forces, finding lost items, bringing good harvests, granting fertility, and reading omens to tell the future.

Geomancy A method of divination that involves interpreting either markings on the ground or the patterns formed by tossed handfuls of soil, rocks, or sand.

Gnosticism A 2nd-century religious movement whose followers believed that knowledge and a pure life could set people free from the material world, which had been created by an inferior god known as a demiurge.

Goetia A type of ceremonial magic that involves summoning demons.

Grimoire A term used from the 18th century onward to refer to a handbook of magic, often dating from the medieval period; also used by Wiccans to refer to the books used by individual practitioners to record their spells and rituals. *See also* Book of Shadows.

Hallucinogen A psychoactive agent that causes hallucinations and other major subjective changes in vision, thoughts, feelings, and consciousness.

Handfasting A rural folkloric and Neopagan custom, initially found in Western European countries, in which a couple hold a commitment ceremony.

Haruspicy In ancient Rome, interpreting omens by inspecting the entrails of animals, especially the livers of sheep and poultry. The religious official who carried out this role was called a haruspex.

Hepatomancy A type of ancient Greek divination that involved examining the livers of sacrificial animals.

Heresy Beliefs that contradict the doctrine of the Catholic Church.

Hermeticism Also called Hermetism, a religious, philosophical, and esoteric tradition based primarily on writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus ("thrice-greatest Hermes").

Hoodoo Sympathetic and folk magic, originating partly in Central Africa and partly in the American Deep South, but now practiced particularly by African Americans in the southern US.

Horoscope A map of the heavens for a particular time and place indicating planetary positions and relationships, which is used to make predictions about personality, fate, events, natural phenomena, or the best times to do things.

Humors (four) Ancient Greek theory promoted by Hippocrates that became a mainstay of medical belief for two thousand years: the body was made up of four humors (components)—blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile; diseases were caused by imbalances in the levels of the humors and could be cured by restoring their equilibrium.

Incantation (The performance of) words that are believed to have a magical effect when spoken or sung.

Initiate Someone who has been through a rite of passage (initiation) into a group or organization, such as a coven of witches or a Masonic lodge.

Kabbalah The ancient Jewish practice of mystical interpretation of the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), first by word of mouth and then by secret codes. Some of its practices were taken up by Christian and Hermetic Kabbalah followers during the Renaissance.

Lecanomancy Looking for patterns in a dish of water, or observing the ripples created by a stone dropped into the water, to predict the future.

Macrocosm The whole of a large and complex structure, especially the world or the universe, in contrast to a small or representative part of it (the microcosm), such as humankind or an individual person.

Magick A spelling variant of magic, used by some practitioners, notably Aleister Crowley in the early 20th century, to differentiate their practices from conjuring.

Mandrake A Mediterranean plant of the nightshade family, with a forked, fleshy root that supposedly resembles the human form and which was formerly used in herbal medicine and magic; it was alleged to shriek when pulled from the ground.

Medium A person who claims to act as an intermediary between the living and the spirits of the dead.

Microcosm A small place or thing that has the traits of a larger counterpart (the macrocosm). In Hermeticism it refers to humankind, regarded as the representation in miniature of the universe.

Mystery cults Unofficial religions that came into existence during the ancient Roman period; built around secrecy and rituals, cult membership was selective.

Mysticism The belief that life has a hidden meaning or that each person can unite with a deity or absolute truth by deep contemplation of spiritual knowledge beyond the capacity of the human intellect; also used in a more general sense to mean belief in religion, spirituality, or the occult.

Natural magic A medieval definition of magic whose effects were thought to be achieved through the occult (hidden) powers of nature.

Necromancy The magic of the dead. The word comes from *nekros*, Greek for "dead body," and *manteia* for "divination," and it was originally a way of acquiring knowledge from the dead. In the late medieval era, it came to mean the ritual conjuring of demons to gain insight into the future or achieve some other task that required their help.

Neopaganism A collective term for a number of modern attempts to revive what practitioners believe to be ancient pagan religious practices.

Neoplatonism A Greco-Roman school of philosophical thinking, based on some of the principles of ancient Greek Platonism. Its followers believe that all existence stems from a single source, which they consider divine, and that the human soul seeks union with this source.

Neoshamanism "New" forms of shamanism, or methods of seeking visions or healing. Neoshamanism comprises an eclectic range of beliefs and practices that involve attempts to attain altered states through trance-inducing rituals, and to communicate with a spirit world. *See also* Shaman.

Netherworld The world of the dead, another word for the underworld.

New Age A range of spiritual beliefs and practices that present an alternative to capitalism and look forward to a more harmonious future lived closer to nature. The movement began in Western countries in the 1970s and now has a broad range of adherents across the globe.

Nigromancy An alternative word for necromancy, used mostly in the medieval period in Europe.

Numerology Magic using numbers, believed to be strongly connected to the universe, to understand past events and predict the future.

Occult Secret mystical, supernatural, or magical powers, practices, or phenomena.

Omen An event regarded as a portent of good or evil.

Oneiromancy Interpretation of dreams.

Oracle Soothsayer believed to answer questions by delivering advice from a god, often in a cryptic form.

Ornithomancy Ancient Greek form of divination carried out by observing the flight of birds.

Palmistry An ancient form of divination that supposedly interprets a person's character or life by studying the lines and mounds on the palm of their hand. Also called chiromancy or palm reading.

Pantheism The belief in many or all gods, or the belief that God exists in, and is the same as, all things, animals, and people within the universe.

Pentagram A five-pointed star used as a talisman in magical evocation. The word pentagram may be used interchangeably with pentacle. A pentacle also refers to a five-pointed star within a circle.

Performance magic Illusionistic tricks or seemingly impossible feats of, for example, endurance carried out to entertain.

Philter A magical potion that, when drunk, causes a person to fall in love with the giver.

Polytheism Belief in many different gods.

Poppet Also known as a poppit, moppet, mommet, or pippy, in folk magic and witchcraft, a doll made to represent a person, for casting spells on that person or to aid that person through magic.

Quack A fraudulent or ignorant pretender to medical skill—someone who claims, professionally or publicly, to have skill, knowledge, or qualifications they do not possess; a charlatan.

Ritual A set of fixed actions and sometimes words performed regularly, especially as part of a ceremony.

Rosicrucianism A 17th-century secret brotherhood that claimed to have discovered ancient esoteric wisdom and religious principles.

Rune Any of the letters of an ancient alphabet cut into stone or wood in the past by the people of Northern Europe, or any similar mark with a secret or magical meaning.

Sabbat Any of eight seasonal festivals, including the equinoxes and solstices, observed by many Neopagans. Sabbat may also refer to a witches' Sabbath—a supposed meeting of witches.

Scry To see what will happen in the future, especially by looking into a reflective object such as a mirror or glass ball.

Seal of Solomon A symbol said to have been given to the biblical King Solomon by God in the form of a seal, and to have allowed him to control and banish demons.

Séance A demonstration during which a medium channels spirits, acting as an intermediary between those spirits and the people present.

Seer A person who claims to be able to predict what will happen in the future.

Shamanism The spiritual practices of people in the steppe lands of Central Asia and Siberia, dating back around 40,000 years, sometimes used more generally (and some would say mistakenly) to refer to wider spiritual and magical tribal traditions. A shaman is thought to have special powers to communicate with and influence good and evil spirits, in order to gain insight into past and future events.

Shape-shifter A person or thing who can apparently change from one form into another, for instance, a werewolf.

Sigil A symbol used in magic, usually a pictorial signature of an angel or spiritual entity. In modern usage, especially in the context of chaos magic, a sigil refers to a symbolic representation of the magician's desired outcome.

Solomonic magic Ritual magic using items linked to the biblical King Solomon—particularly the Seal of Solomon—that aims to gain control over demons by calling upon angels or saints.

Solstice Either of the two occasions in the year when the sun is directly above either the furthest point north or the furthest point south of the equator that it reaches. These are the times of the year when there are the longest hours of day or night.

Soothsayer A person able to foresee the future.

Sorcery A type of magic in which spirits, especially evil ones, are used to make things happen.

Spell A spoken word or form of words believed to have magical power.

Spiritism Similar to spiritualism, the belief that people's spirits survive after death and can be contacted through mediums. Spiritists also believe in reincarnation.

Spiritualism The belief, dating from the 19th century, that people who have died can communicate with the living, typically through a facilitator called a medium; also the religious belief that all reality is spiritual, rather than material. *See also* Séance.

Spirit world The world or realm believed by some to be inhabited by spirits, both good and evil, of people who have died.

Sympathetic magic Magic based on imitation, so, for example, spells can be cast on a doll made to look like a particular person to help or harm that individual. In traditional healing, a form of magic in which the healer finds something similar to the ailment in nature and attempts to banish the disease with it—for example, using a naturally based, yellow potion to cure jaundice. *See also* Doctrine of signatures.

Syncretism The combining of different religions, cultures, or ideas; an instance of this, such as Halloween, which has pagan and Christian roots.

Talisman A crafted object into which positive powers have been transferred by a magical ritual. *See also* Amulet.

Tarot A system of divination using a deck of 78 specially designed cards, made up of 22 Major Arcana, each of which carries special significance, and 56 Minor Arcana assigned to one of four suits—wands, pentacles, swords, and cups.

Theosophy A philosophy based on the idea that a knowledge of God may be achieved through spiritual ecstasy, direct intuition, and intense study of the occult, mainly linked to the Theosophical Society founded in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott.

Theurgy A system of rituals to seek help from a god or benign spirits, particularly angels, to work magic or miracles.

Totem An object that is revered by a group of people, especially for religious and symbolic reasons.

Transference In folk medicine, the idea—allied to sympathetic magic—that a person may rid themselves of a disease by transmitting it to another person, or an animal or plant. Also refers to the life force, energy, or knowledge of the future that is believed to be transmitted from the spirit world to a medium, often using divination tools such as tarot cards.

Tree of life In Christian and Hermetic Kabbalah, a diagram consisting of 10 nodes or spheres meant to represent aspects of God, divinity, existence, or the human psyche. The nodes are linked by lines. In Jewish Kabbalah, in which the tree of life originates, it is called an *ilan* and the nodes, which represent aspects of the divine, are called *sephiroth*.

True will In Thelema (the spiritual philosophy founded by Aleister Crowley in the early 1900s), a person's destiny or perfect path. Aligned both with their true desires and with nature, it is believed to spring from the connection between their deepest self and the divine universe.

Underworld The mythical abode of the dead, imagined as being under the earth.

Voodoo Also called Voudon or Vodun, a religion characterized by ancestor worship and possession by spirits. It originated in West Africa, where it still flourishes, and is also practiced in the Caribbean and the southern US, in a form that combines elements of Roman Catholic ritual with traditional African magical and religious rites.

Wand A rod used to cast magic spells or perform conjuring tricks.

Wicca A major branch of Neopaganism: a nature-based tradition of witchcraft founded in England in the mid-20th century and influenced by pre-Christian religions. Followers believe in the power of magic and in male and female deities, and Wiccan rituals and festivals mark seasonal and life cycles.

Witch Usually a woman, someone who is believed to have magical powers and who uses them to harm or help other people or change things from one form to another.

Zoroastrianism A monotheistic pre-Islamic religion of ancient Persia founded by Zoroaster in the 6th century BCE. It was dualistic—characterized by a struggle between the forces of good and evil.

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"Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble."

THE THREE WITCHES IN SHAKESPEARE'S *MACBETH*, 1606–07